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THE RYUO'S WORK IS  
NEVER DONE!



VISIT...

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THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE!









“.....?!”

“I would  
like to thank  
my daughter,  
who has stuck  
with this  
geezer of a  
father for so  
long.”

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“The  
Grade  
Schooler  
Trio is  
looking  
up at me,  
dressed  
up in their  
fanciest  
clothes.”

“Glanc-  
ing down  
out of the  
corner of  
my eye to  
find the  
young  
voices  
——”







High-Stakes Shogi  
Live On or Die Off.

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Shogi lives are on the line.

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# MEET THE CHARACTERS



## YAICHI KUZURYU

Ryuo. Went to a fancy clothing store after successfully defending his title with his mind set on purchasing the latest trendy clothes, but wound up shopping at a cheap chain store instead.



## AI HINATSURU

Yaichi's first apprentice. She outgrew several outfits recently and went shopping with Keika. Her priorities for her new clothing were of course Master's favorites.



## KOUSUKE KIYOTAKI

Yaichi's Master. Claims with utmost certainty that the rhythm-based adventure games on his smartphone help build the concentration necessary for Shogi. "In-app purchases are as normal as having dinner."

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## GINKO SORA

Yaichi's elder sister apprentice. Although she had little interest in clothing up to this point, she ordered a fashion catalog after her younger brother apprentice complimented the outfit she received in Harajuku.

## AI YASHAJIN

Yaichi's second apprentice. Closet lined with black clothing, she is often approached by scouts working for Gothic Lolita magazines when walking around the city.



## KEIKA KIYOTAKI

Daughter of Yaichi's Master. As the older sister (mother?) of the Kiyotaki Shogi family, all fashion choices are under her control. Very thrifty when shopping for herself.

## AYUMU KANNABE

Yaichi's rival and Kanto Shogi player. His interests have recently expanded beyond fashion and into interior design. Wants a wardrobe with curved ball-and-claw-style legs.



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# THE RYUO'S WORK IS NEVER DONE

VOLUME 7

SHIROW SHIRATORI

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# JOYOUS COMMENTS FROM TEN YEARS AGO

Back when I was a boy, I had the same dream as every other boy around.

To be—the Meijin.

That dream drove me to dive headfirst into the unforgiving world of Shogi hopefuls in training with no guarantees about the future.

One has to become a Shogi player to become the Meijin. Armed with that knowledge, I jumped at the chance to enter the Sub League without a second thought.

The Sub League: where there's no telling what's in store.

The only thing I could clearly see in that never-ending darkness was my dream.

Of course, my goal once I became a pro was to become the Meijin.

But in the pros—caught in the constant ebb and flow of the placement matches—that dream got chipped away to the point that I couldn't see it anymore.

Promoted, demoted, staying stagnant ..... The process repeated itself so much I thought I would never have a chance to become the Meijin.

That chance belonged to players who turned pro as junior high students and got promoted all the way to A rank without getting stuck once: the chosen ones. I started to believe players who counted victory stars with each passing year, praying there would be enough like me who would get demoted, who weren't meant to have a shot.

I *hit the ceiling* so many times when I belonged to C-2, going 9 wins and 1 loss over and over again, that the despairing thought that I would never get promoted began to seep in.

The same thing happened in C-1, and again in B-2 and B-1, always hitting my head on the ceiling ..... Even when I was finally promoted to the A rank, I went 4 and 5 and found myself back in B-1 after only one season.

I was the only one unable to stay in A with four victories. Hitting that ceiling was a hard pill to swallow.

*I guess I never had it in me to be the Meijin after all .....*

The turning point came when I had that painful taste in my mouth.

I took two apprentices.

One a four-year-old girl and the other a six-year-old boy. I made them live-in apprentices.

Surely, there were plenty who thought it was *strange in this day and age*.

However, I was the most astounded by what I'd done. I was in no position to look after other human beings no matter how you looked at it. Even I thought I was trying to run away from reality. No matter how talented those kids were .....

Though, it seemed those two kids thought I was the best in the world.

"Why aren't you the Meijin, Master?" they asked me point-blank, their faces completely serious.

"Bein' Meijin ain't somethin' ya can just decide on yar own," I said that day. "Ya gotta be chosen by the Shogi gods ..... My turn may be comin' up, though."

When they heard that, they went around saying, "Our Master's going to be Meijin really soon!" to anyone and everyone. That put me in quite a fix more than once.

However, a desire to meet their expectations could be the reason I was promoted once again. I'm not sure how else to explain how my record keeps improving despite having so much more to do than before .....



Looking back on it, I was also promoted during the biggest event in my life to date. That just could be how it goes.

Dreams are mysterious things.

Holding onto them was so easy as a kid, but doing so as an adult is very difficult. Light and yet heavy, clear but also murky, they are mysterious indeed.

My apprentices found the dream that I had lost and gave it back to me.

I will never lose it again.

Now that I'm back in A, I want to take another shot at making that dream come true.

I want to be the Meijin.



# RYUDO OSHI

## RECORD 1



9-DAN

Kousuke  
Kiyotaki

|                |                       |
|----------------|-----------------------|
| PLAYER NUMBER: | 175                   |
| BIRTHDATE:     | November 1, 1966      |
| HOMETOWN:      | Osaka-fu              |
| MASTER:        | (the late) Juzo Sakai |

# △ THE 76<sup>TH</sup> MEIJIN LEAGUE

## C Rank 2nd Class Placement Matches

### 8<sup>th</sup> Round, 6<sup>th</sup> Update

△ Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu (7 wins 0 losses)  
 ○ ▲ 4-dan Mirai Futatsuzuka (7 wins 0 losses)

△ Kuzuryu: 歩12, 金2, 香3

▲ Futatsuzuka: 飛 1, 角1, 金1, 銀1, 桂1, 歩1

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |   |
| 三 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 一 |
| 三 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 二 |
| 三 |   |   |   |   | 馬 |   |   | 龍 |   | 三 |
| 金 | 歩 | 銀 |   |   |   | 桂 |   |   |   | 四 |
| 電 |   |   |   | 桂 |   | 歩 |   | 竜 |   | 五 |
| 九 |   |   |   |   | 王 |   |   |   |   | 六 |
| 頭 | 歩 |   | 歩 | 金 | 王 |   |   |   |   | 七 |
| 二 |   |   |   | 玉 | 桂 |   | 王 |   |   | 八 |
| ツ |   |   |   |   | 銀 |   |   |   |   | 九 |
| 塚 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 飛 | 香 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 銀 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 桂 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 歩 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 金 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |

歩: PAWN  
 角: BISHOP  
 飛: ROOK  
 香: LANCE  
 桂: KNIGHT  
 銀: SILVER  
 金: GOLD  
 玉: KING

(Formation at concession: through △ 5 Six Gold)

Waiting Time: 6 hours each (chess clock system)

usage: ▲ 5 hours 59 min.

△ 5 hours 59 min.



# Revolutionizing Bishop Exchange

The fierce, late night battle ended with Kuzuryu's King Dragon check into checkmate.

However, the decisive move in the match came in the early game with Kuzuryu's aggressive ♖6 Five Knight offensive.

The A-ranking Takanobu Shiraishi, who was directly involved in match analysis, explained with enthusiasm, "Up until now, defensive Bishop Exchange has been a *biding* strategy. Simply wait until the opponent forces an attack, triggers a Repetition Draw, etc ..... However, that ♖6 Five Knight proves that the defender can meet the offensive head on. The balance of power among Bishop Exchange strategies has been rewritten overnight!"

According to Shiraishi, Kuzuryu's new discovery shows that the previously believed obligatory ♖9 Four Pawn can be omitted.

"It was common knowledge that leaving it in place would prevent any and all attack opportunities down the edge. At the very least, I believed it to be true for my full twenty years as a professional. That twenty years has been turned on its head by this seventeen year old. A young man who became a professional less than two years ago did it in one move. Can you believe it?"

If the words of the Bishop Exchange Specialist, aptly nicknamed Unicorn, are to be believed, Kuzuryu's discovery will be analyzed for a long time to come.

With this victory, Kuzuryu remains undefeated in the placement matches. To date, he has won ten consecutive league matches. What's truly impressive is that four of those were against the Meijin himself.

His unfavorable record last season put him at a considerable disadvantage when placement matches began. Should he win out, Kuzuryu will be promoted to C-1 no matter what. Two matches remain. He is more than qualified for

promotion.

At this very moment, one boy's appearance in the Shogi world is changing the history of the sport in monumental ways.

In closing, I would like to leave off on a comment the Ryuo provided concerning the ♙ 6 Five Knight offensive fresh from his latest victory in a winning streak dating back to his successful title defense.

"Starting a revolution sounds fun."

(Kumquat)

## Thread999

**"Trash Ryuo" "History's strongest Loli-Lover"**

**"Folding cranes: wishing for Yaichi Kuzuryu to lose his title"**

**"Only the fourth junior high pro in history and the youngest ever to claim a title, the fastest ever to stand on top of the Shogi world at 16 years 4 months and now the youngest ever to defend a title, let's hear what you have to say about Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu!"**

**"The trash that prevented the Meijin from getting the Eternal Septuple and his 100th title season."**

**"The trash that revolutionized Bishop Exchange defense."**

**"The trash that's been piling up victory stars by advancing a single Knight using offensive Bishop Exchange."**

**"Isn't it crazy how he can win with such a newbie strat? Shocking how the generation raised by *The Knight that jumps far falls prey to the Pawn* can fall to something that level, don't you think?"**

**"That match today was crazy ..... People have gotta be scared to play a**

*yagura* against him .....

“Even that Natagiri couldn’t stand up to him with a *yagura*.”

“Kuzuryu, the *Yagura* Slayer.”

“This Loli-con is scary as hell.”

“But, come on, everyone knows that *new move* he played came from software, right?”

“I’ll just put this out there, but the term *from software* stopped being a knock against players years ago.”

“Yep, yep. The fact that perv can play like a computer already makes him more than human.”

“That just makes him scarier.”

“With Ai H. and Ai Y. growing up so fast and Naniwa’s Snow White promoted to 3-*dan*, it feels like he’s at the center of everything happening in the Shogi world right now.”

“I heard that he also does practice sessions with Sota-boy, that grade school kid who got promoted to 3-*dan* last week.”

“So, boys or girls are fine so long as they’re grade schoolers, eh .....? *Lolita complex* exhibit A, that one .....

“Just sending Ten-chan out into the world is a saintly achievement in and of itself. Thank you.”

“Think maybe it’s about time the thread title got changed?”

“After being OP forever, I couldn’t care less.”

“This *Trash Ryuo* and *wishing on cranes* thing’s gotta go.”

“But, keep around the *History’s Strongest Loli-Lover*.”

“Agreed.”

**“Get rid of the *Trash Ryuo* and put in something like *Top Breeder*?”**

**“Agreed with force.”**

**“Agreed in a flash.”**

**“All right, that’ll be the next thread title!”**

**“All set~ > *Top Breeder* Yaichi Kuzuryu Thread1000 *History’s Strongest Loli-Lover*.”**

**“Gr8.”**

**“Nicely done! Come and play Shogi against Ai at mine!”**



## AWARD CEREMONY

“Anointment.”

Chairman Tsukimitsu’s cool and composed voice echoes out of the speakers in the hotel’s massive and extravagantly decorated grand hall.

“You have emerged victorious in the season’s Ryuo Title Match. Therefore, I hereby anoint you as the 30th season Dragon King, Ryuo.”

He holds up a certificate made of thick, traditional-style handmade paper.

Handing it to me, I respectfully take it with both hands.

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

It’s just paper, but the certificate is heavy enough to make my hands shake.

The weight of a title.

“..... This is your second time. You must familiarize yourself with this feeling.”

I guess he must’ve sensed my nerves because the chairman switches off the microphone and whispers into my ear, “I’m not so sure. I’ve still got a lot to learn .....

Coming up with that was all my terrified brain could do after getting teased by the Eternal Meijin.

I also meet Sasari Oga’s eyes, the chairman’s secretary looming behind him like a shadow, currently holding a large empty tray painted with many layers of black lacquer (where the certificate used to be). She gives me a soft smile. The corners of my eyes start heating up as memories start coming back to me of the little nudge she gave me just before the rematch of the Fourth Ryuo Title Match.

Then I step over to stand next to the chairman with the certificate in my hands so the photographers have a chance to take a few pictures.

The chairman and I exchange words back and forth amidst all the smiles and camera flashes.

“I was wondering, chairman. With you being blind and all, how do you read the certificate?”

“I have done this ceremony enough times to have the terminology memorized. The format itself is set, so only the vocabulary and names are changed for each one.”

“That explains it.”

“I remember being on the receiving end long ago, but recently I have always been behind the microphone. It would be nice to stand on the receiving end for a change.”

That got me to crack a smile at first, but his tone cut right through me. I freeze, that grin stuck on my face.

He has to contend with his handicap, but Chairman Tsukimitsu is still an active player and also has an A ranking. I wouldn't be surprised if he did claim a title ..... He's still in the running to challenge the Meijin in this year's placement matches too .....

On a side note, regarding titles, the Ryuo gets *anointed*, but Big Sis was *conferred* the Women's Throne title at the Conferring Ceremony yesterday.

The Meijin gets *presided*, the King gets *bestowed* and the Throne gets *granted*.

It's interesting how the certificates say pretty much the same thing, but the wording changes for each one.

Next up, the president of the newspaper company that has the rights to the Ryuo Title Match presents me with the Ryuo Cup (formally known as the

Chichibunomiya Memorial Cup) and my prize money.

Altogether: 43,200,000 yen.

— Including last year's prize money, I've made almost 100 million .....

It's said that the average businessman makes 200 million yen during their career, so I've almost reached the halfway point and I'm still seventeen. All I'm doing is playing the game I love ..... Almost doesn't feel real.

That's when I notice someone looking up at me from below the stage.

"! ..... Master ....."

My Master, Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*, is quietly grinning at me from a little ways away.

His eyes are glistening from beneath his glasses, which is making me have to start fighting back tears.

If I'd never met him ..... What would I be doing right now? Where would I be?

"And now, it is time to present the Ryuo with flowers," Chairman Tsukimitsu says to the microphone and——.

The main doors to this grand hall capable of holding a good thousand people swing open as three girls walk in accompanied by music that gets played all the time at wedding ceremonies ..... which is fine, but.

"Huuuh?! Isn't that ....."

The crowd parts for her to walk right down the center——a tiny little girl.

"Walking at the head of the group is the Ryuo's first apprentice, Ai Hinatsuru Women's League 2-*kyu*. She displayed a marvelous sense for offensive timing in yesterday's Women's Legend Preliminary Match as this young prodigy claimed a decisive victory in her debut. At the same time, she supports the Ryuo on a day-to-day basis as his precious live-in apprentice. Currently ten years old!"

Ai is wearing a long, flowy white dress.

Yes, one that wouldn't look out of place at a wedding .....

“Behind her is Ai Yashajin Women's League 1-*kyu*, another one of the Ryuo's apprentices. Qualifying for this season's Mynavi Open quarterfinals, she has become the Women's League's *Cinderella*. Also ten years old!”

Although her dress is mostly black, this one looks like a wedding dress, too.

“And the last in line is ..... someone who needs no introduction. Holding two Women's Titles and the first female ever to join the Sub League's 3-*dan* Division, she has garnered a great deal of press coverage after defending her Women's Throne title for the fourth year running and underwent the Conferring Ceremony yesterday. The most recognizable name in today's Shogi world, Naniwa's Snow White——Ginko Sora 3-*dan*, currently fifteen!!”

For some reason, Big Sis is also wearing something pretty close to a wedding dress as all three have bundles of flowers that look like bouquets in their arms.

Sure, I have strong relationships with all three, so any one of them is qualified to be the one to present me with the ceremonial flowers but .....

But, why?! Why did the chairman have to tack on their ages at the end like that?!

“Now, Ryuo.”

Holding the microphone away from me with one hand, he puts the other on my shoulder and whispers into my ear so no one else could hear him.





“Whose flowers are you going to take?”

“?! Whose .....?”

I’m sure the chairman just wanted to sound cool, but ..... There’s nothing cool about this situation at all.

(Prioritize Big Sis)→ Ai Hinatsuru gets angry and Ai Yashajin silently rages.

(Prioritize Ai Hinatsuru) → Big Sis gets angry and Ai Yashajin silently rages.

(Prioritize Ai Yashajin) → Ai Hinatsuru and Big Sis get angry and Ai Yashajin gets furious for some reason.

See? I’m screwed no matter what I do.

“Master? You’ll take my bouquet, right?”

Ai Hinatsuru, my first apprentice’s faith in me is unwavering.

“I-I’m not here ..... because I *wanted* to be the one to give you the flowers, *Sensei*. But, everyone said the ceremony would be so depressing if I weren’t here to do it ..... Be grateful I came all this way and hurry up and take them, you jerk!!”

Ai Yashajin looks away like she’s angry about something and thrusts the flowers out at me like a rapier.

“Ten seconds ..... Nine, eight, seven, six———.”

As for Big Sis, she starts counting down the seconds.

This is more pressure than the late stages of a title match. I’m trembling .....!

—What am I supposed to do?! Three choices ..... Which one is right?!

Hundreds of eyes are trained on me from all over the grand hall. Journalists zoom in their cameras. My apprentices are applying pressure. Big Sis’s voice,

counting seconds one by one ..... With all of that bearing down on me at once, I desperately set to reading.

Read.

Read. Read. Read. Readreadreadreadreadreadreadreadread .....

Then———I found it! I choose *the fourth choice*!

“This! Here is my answerrrrrrrrrrr———!!”

“?!”

Holding my arms out wide, I jump off the stage and collect all three bouquets at once!

(Take all bouquets at the same time.)

In that moment, I reversed the check path reversal.

“..... My word. Indecisive even under the perfect circumstances.”

“After all the chairman went through to provide a push, you find a way to make it all fall apart. Trash among trash, that’s what you are.”

Chairman Tsukimitsu shrugs as Ms. Oga lets out a long, frustrated sigh. Well, don’t expect any *thank yous* out of me!

“Mmgh~ .....!”

“..... Humph.”

“..... Tsk!”

Both my apprentices and Big Sis are making faces like they got forced into a Repetition Draw on offense. In other words, they’re not happy.

Shogi players love playing Shogi more than anything. Living in a world where everything is as cut and dry as win or lose, we develop the bad habit of making every little thing into a competition. This here has nothing to do with how they feel about me but more wanting to be prioritized, to *beat the others or they’ll*

*get angry about it.* The worst .....!

“W-Well, I’ve got to say all of you are looking very cute!”

All three bouquets in my arms and the biggest smile I can muster on my face, I force the conversation in a new direction.

“Seriously, those dresses are spectacular!! They’re perfect for you! Did you borrow them from the hotel’s wedding chapel?”

“They are all designed by my hand,” an elegant voice echoes through the hall as a woman enters accompanied by a young man escorting her.

“That’s Women’s Legend, Rina Shakando .....!”

“Which means the man leading her by the hand must be Ayumu Kannabe 6-dan ..... Aren’t they the picture-perfect Master and apprentice .....?”

Whispers and impressed sighs start coming from all over the room.

The woman making a grand entrance dressed like someone straight out of some ancient dynasty is a Women’s League Title holder, a living legend known as the Eternal Queen.

Owning her own fashion brand as well as running her own shop out of her Shogi classroom in Harajuku, Ms. Shakando is one of the most unique Shogi players around.

She has such an overwhelming presence that even Big Sis listens to what she has to say. Now that rare woman is pointing to each of the three girls with a fan that looks more like a peacock feather and starts describing each of her creations with pride.

“The bases were such high caliber that every moment spent coordinating was very much worth the time. There is no higher standard of beauty that these three are displaying, don’t you agree?”

“Yes! Yes! I totally agree!!” I yell loud enough to make sure the three of them hear me. “All of you are at least a hundred times cuter than usual! It made my

decision so much harder~! That's Ms. Shakando for you. There's no mistaking her work."

"Fufu. 'Tis the *season* for professional Shogi players to be distraught. Presenting beautiful flowers such as these does much to lighten the celebratory mood, do they not?"

".....!"

Now that she pointed it out, the air in here is *heavy* ..... It's far too tense to be called an award ceremony, for sure.

I know exactly why. It's always this way this time of year.

"Although it cannot be helped ..... I simply wanted to soothe the atmosphere. After all, my beloved disciple is to receive an award of his own this day. Yes? God Cauldron."

"Yes, Master."

Ayumu, graciously bowing before her, won Group 6 of the Ryuo Title Match Preliminaries.

All of the group winners have gathered at this Anointing Ceremony to be recognized. That could be why Ayumu is pulling out all the stops ..... You know that picture of Napoleon when he became emperor in the history books? That's Ayumu right now.

But everyone here is going along with his flashy outfit.

Ayumu may have lost to the Meijin the final Ryuo Title Match Qualifier, but his bold fighting style made him into a star player. This bizarreness is just making his name spread faster in the Shogi world.

*Meijin Apparent.*

For young Shogi pros, his nickname has to induce both expectations and fear at the same time. Though he still refers to himself as the silver saint *god* something or other .....

Said Ayumu looks up at me with a competitive spark in his eyes and says, “All I did was conquer the lowest ranking group, number 6. The divide between us is still far too great, Dragkin ..... But, don’t you dare look away! For the season I claim your head is upon us!!”

He still calls me that.

“I’m only above you in the Ryuo League, remember? You’ve got better records than me everywhere else, have played more league matches and even have a better winning percentage. You’re so far ahead of me that there’s no point comparing .....

Admitting it out loud really hurts.

“That is due to your right to bypass the preliminaries as the titleholder and the fact that your title constantly aligns you with only the higher-ranking players.”

“But, I still can’t measure up to your over seventy-five percent win rate.”

“If I may, my darling apprentice possesses a one hundred percent win rate in placement matches. Though it’s plainly obvious, that is the best in recorded history,” Ms. Shakando chimes in with pride.

In other words, Ayumu has won every single one of his nearly thirty placement matches since he turned pro. Sir Ayumu is just too strong in placement matches.

“You’re turning him into one heck of a beast .....

“Because I’m raising him to meet my ideals. Players strong in placement matches are the players closest to the Meijin. Though I hesitate to say this at the Ryuo’s Anointment Ceremony, *old types* like us believe that the title of Meijin is the one to be revered and thus the one to strive for.”

I’m pretty sure I agree with that, actually.

Even I dreamt of *being the Meijin* back when I was a kid (just above being the



receptionist at a hot spring bathhouse). The status of Meijin holds a special place in the hearts of everyone who plays Shogi.

Placement Matches are the long, hard-fought road of battles leading to that position.

Since those battles take place throughout the year, it takes a very long time to claim the right to challenge the Meijin. It's completely different from the Ryuo League, where someone can come out of nowhere and claim it with one quick surge.

Overall ranking is divided into five different classes spanning from C-2 all the way up to A, and you can only be promoted once per year.

Basically, it takes at least five years to even have a shot.

Since turning pro, Ayumu has been getting promoted nonstop without hitting a single roadblock. That's the main reason people call him the *Meijin Apparent*.

"Aren't you the only person left undefeated in B-2 this season? Your promotion is pretty much in the bag already. Two months from now you'll be in B-1 as Ayumu Kannabe 7-dan."

"My placement is rather low. Promotion would be inconceivable without a flawless record."

"Well, that's true."

Considering his Shogi skills and this current tear he's on, I'd be willing to bet he'll break right through without a loss.

—Hold on a second, who's he scheduled to play against in the final B-2 placement match again .....

I wrack my brain to remember what was written on the placement match schedule, but Ayumu's next words drag me back into reality.

"You're one to talk ..... Just what was that Shogi yesterday?"

“You were watching the coverage?”

Big Sis was in Tokyo for the Women’s Throne Conferring Ceremony in this same hotel yesterday while my two apprentices and I all had matches in the city, so it was like the whole Shogi family went on a field trip. Keika stayed behind because she had something to take care of in Osaka.

Everyone won their matches.

So, coming to the Anointing Ceremony today felt like a walk in the park. At least it did until the bouquet surprise just a few moments ago .....

“I saw that in the middle of the match and thought it might be a fun way to shake things up. I mean, it was getting covered all over the Internet, so I thought I should entertain the fans a bit. But, I didn’t think it’d go that well.”

“I-In the middle ..... of the match .....?”

Instead of being surprised, Ayumu looks like what I just said actually hurt.

“You are saying that you broke *the* Natagiri 8-dan’s *yagura* ..... Completely on the fly?!”

“Of course, a lot of research went into it. But, I was in the zone yesterday and I could see everything line up ..... So, yeah, the *yagura* is already dead.”

*Chatter!!*

What I just said sent waves through the hall.

The already tense air in here feels prickly all of a sudden.

Ayumu says in disbelief, “T-the *yagura* ..... is dead .....?”

“Yeah. Offense, defense, it doesn’t matter. *Yagura* castles won’t work. The balance is too lopsided. Even software won’t use it. You must have started to figure that out, right? Isn’t that why you used a *snowroof* against the Meijin in the Ryuo Qualifier rather than your bread and butter *yagura*?”

“.....”

Ayumu fearfully glances around in little spurts.

Winner of the Group 1 Ryuo Preliminaries, the Meijin, is also here somewhere.

But he's surrounded by fans per usual, so you can usually tell where he is by finding the largest clump of people in the hall.

So I highly doubt he overheard us.

"The Meijin chose to use a *yagura* against you, and your snowroof got checkmated in the end. But my analysis tells me that you would have won if you hadn't messed up in the late game. Right now, I feel like I could win against anyone using a *yagura*, no matter who it is."

"Dragkin, are you ..... aware of how people refer to you in Kanto?"

"It's got to be *trash* or *loli-con* or something like that, right?"

"..... May ignorance continue to shield you."

"Come again?"

He's not saying another word. What's going on?

"That's the spirit, young Ryuo. Ever so audacious," interjects Ms. Shakando through a tight-lipped grin.

"The age of *yagura* is at an end ..... Is it? Old types like myself will have some difficulty coming to terms with that. It was said to be the purest form of Shogi in our day, and playing any other strategy in the Meijin Title Match was considered nothing short of sacrilege ....."

"Seems like it. I remember Master telling me that a long time ago."

I even heard that the current Meijin nearly got roasted alive because he used a Central Rook strategy the first time he challenged for the title.

It's unbelievable nowadays, but Master said that seeing it really *pissed him off* when he was watching the match in real time.

That Master of mine is tapping away on his smartphone not too far away from me right now.

I bet he's buying something in some mobile game to celebrate his apprentice getting anointed. He's been using anything as an excuse to pour money into that game recently .....

"He seems too focused on it to have picked up anything," I said.

Well, even if he did hear me, he'd probably just laugh it off and let it slide. I'm not lying or anything.

"Be that as it may ....."

Ms. Shakando places her hand on Ayumu's shoulder.

"There are no longer any chinks in God Cauldron's armor. Be it *yagura* or any other strategy, the Silver Chevalier is fully prepared to boldly stand against anything ..... Isn't that right?"

"Of course, my Master."

Ayumu nods with all the confidence in the world. I can't help but bust his chops a bit.

"Are you sure about that, Ayumu? All I have to do to turn the tables is drag out the match into a night game."

"Fufu ..... As I said, young Ryuo, he has become invulnerable. That blemish has long since been taken care of. We often play long into the night as of late, yes?" says Ms. Shakando as she runs her finger down her beloved apprentice's chin.

"I rather enjoy being thoroughly intertwined in back and forth struggles for extended periods of time ..... just like a *yagura*."

"M-Mhhstaaa ....."

That's one heck of a *bond* these two are showing off. It's so out in the open,

*I'm* getting embarrassed just watching.

Playing long into the night, being intertwined ..... All of these *adult* ways to describe their relationship are making things awkward between Big Sis and me. My apprentices, on the other hand, haven't made the connection yet and are just looking up with "?" in their eyes.

But that doesn't explain .....

"Big Sis? Um, are you feeling okay? People don't normally turn that red——."

"S-Shut up! I'll end you right here!!"

"Huh?! Careful, Big Sisoufff?!"

Shoulder shaking, Big Sis spins around and flings her elbow directly into my chin. Clean hit.

I go tumbling to the floor, bouquets at all.

That night, pictures of me laying on the floor in the middle of all those flower petals were on news sites with the title *Snow White Decks Ryuo at Anointing Ceremony*. How'd the ceremony turn out like this .....?

## CELEBRATION

Then, the next day.

Returning to Osaka right afterward, now we've got a party to go to over here.

"Thank you for coming tonight! Your continuous support is greatly appreciated!" says the entire Shogi family, greeting our guests as they come into the five-star hotel hosting the event. I'm used to opening night parties before title matches, but this is something completely new.

"Kiyotaki Shogi Family Celebration."

Yes.

Master Kiyotaki is the one who set this party up.

He invited all the sponsors and fans who've supported us through thick and thin to come do instructional matches and have dinner with us. In other words, this is our Shogi family's *fan appreciation* party.

"..... I've got to say, he went all out. How much did he spend on this place?"

"Of course, we're in the red," says Keika with a dejected look on her face. She's been scrambling since the end of last year to get everything in place and had to stay in Osaka yesterday to make sure it all came together.

"'We got the Ryuo, highest rankin' player in the Shogi world, and the Dual Title Holder and strongest girl in Women's Shogi together in the same spot, so I wanna put on the best shindig Japan's ever seen!' is what fath- ..... what Master said."

"It's because Master still thinks like people back in the seventies. I've heard they used to break the bank to do these parties one after another."

I've also heard that *because* they had all these fancy parties, *Shogi players* went from being considered gamblers to being treated as *Shogi professionals*.



The players themselves put the entire Shogi world on their shoulders.

“A lot of that was probably for show. But——.”

Keika forces the tired look off her face and gives me a gentle smile.

“He was really, really happy that you beat the Meijin, Yaichi.”

“.....”

I start twiddling my thumbs, too embarrassed to say anything.

I’m so glad to hear that Master was that happy for me ..... My heart could just burst out of my chest.

I was nothing more than some stranger’s kid, but Master spent his own money to support me without saying a word and is now throwing this massive party.

But that’s not all. Master Kiyotaki has looked after me ever since I became a live-in apprentice, including my Shogi training. That’s hard enough to do for your own son, but he did it all for me .....

“? Is something wrong, Yaichi? Did you catch a cold?”

“Nah, just um ..... I’m good.”

Keika must’ve heard me sniffing, mistook it for a runny nose, and was nice enough to ask. That mistake might’ve been on purpose, now that I think about it.

“B-But yeah ..... There are all sorts of people here tonight who aren’t part of the Go and Shogi worlds. The governor and the Mayor of Osaka are here!” I say to distract her from my tears, but Keika nods like I was stating the obvious.

“You and the girls have reached the point where those people will come. You and Ginko are the faces of the Shogi world, and both of your apprentices are just starting to get noticed. Of course you’d get fans in business and political circles!”

“Which reminds me, where is Shumai-*sensei*? It looks like she’s not here yet.”

“She’s been banned from all Shogi events after what happened on New Year’s.”

“Ah, yeah.”

The First Move Ceremony C\*ck Incident. That’d get anyone banned.

Once the greetings were over, it was on to Shogi.

“The program you received at the reception desk has a number card inside! Use that number to claim your spot for an instruction match!”

The hotel staff helps Keika do crowd control as everyone rushes toward the boards.

This event may be for the Kiyotaki Shogi family, but as is customary in Kansai where everyone is family, all the Kansai players are here.

Even though everyone is extremely busy with league matches, the Kansai Shogi family is out in full force with our *father* the Don of Naniwa, Tatsuo Zaou 9-*dan* leading the charge. Thanks to their cooperation, we were able to set it up so that all of our eager guests would be able to receive one instructional match.

But most of them are zeroed in on Big Sis and my grade school-aged apprentices.

Especially Naniwa’s Snow White, whose popularity has gone through the roof now that she’s the strongest female Shogi player in history as well as the first-ever woman to reach 3-*dan* in the Sub League. She’s doing three matches at once to keep up, but the line for each board is snaking toward the back of the room——.

“Pointless.”

“Ooff .....!”

“Why make that move? Even a pig wouldn’t make a move that pointless.”

“Hooh! Ahhhh .....!!”

“Pointless. That one’s pointless, too. No point, no point, no point, pointless, pointlesspointless.”

“*Gaaasp!*”

“Ah, ahhhhh .....≡”

“M-Mistress ..... More .....! Keep up your ruthless assault, grind me into duuust .....!”

Big Sis’s instructional matches are so strict they might as well just be called *chastising*. Her sharp words crack like a whip every time someone makes a mistake. It seems like the line of middle-aged male faces contorting in ecstasy will never stop. Just what kind of party is this?

“That’s too much ..... is what I’d like to say, but the guests look pretty happy (?) so, I can’t just tell her not to .....”

As for Ai Hinatsuru——.

“Here! That’s checkmate.”

“Huh?! B-But I can still do this .....”

“Yes, you can, but hereherehereherehere ..... And checkmate. Seventeen moves.”

“.....”

“That’s a checkmate, too. Thirty-five moves. It’s a little long, but it’s a simple sequence so try to figure it out on your own!”

“Uh-huh ..... Simple .....”

She’s friendly enough, but she’s checkmating everyone in the blink of an eye. Even the most confident of guests are walking away from her board hunched over on the verge of tears.

I know she’s just trying to help, so I can’t exactly tell her off, either. She’s the

most vicious type of instructor out there.

“..... Compared to the other two, she’s perfect, don’t you think?”

“For sure. I never expected her to be that good .....

Keika and I are watching a young lady dressed in black politely giving constructive criticism. What’s more, she’s doing it better than anyone else.

“I’d say that move is worth eighty points. Not too bad. But ..... There’s one worth one hundred twenty on the board, so take your time and think it through.”

“..... Is ... this it?”

“Yes! I knew you could find it.”

She’s making her opponents think for themselves rather than just pointing out what they should do. Once they make it to the correct answer, she showers them with compliments, all with a charming smile on her face.

“I didn’t even see that move. A good one, for sure. Looks like I’m the one who learned something.”

“N-No, no ..... That was just luck! Ha ha ha!”

Since Ai Yashajin gives a lot of compliments and explains the good parts rather cutting them off and forcing information down their throats no matter how bad or bizarre her opponents’ moves were, everyone who goes to her board leaves with a satisfied smile on their face.

“..... Perfect. That instructional match was just perfect .....

She wasn’t always like this ..... Maybe some of the things I’ve been teaching her are getting through. If that’s the case, then I couldn’t be happier.

I flashed her a smile when our eyes happened to meet, but all she did was stick her tongue out and say, “*Blah.*” Adorable.

Just as I was basking in my apprentice’s progress——.

A woman wearing a suit tries to sneak into Ai Yashajin's line. So I go and put my hand on her shoulder.

"..... Akira. We're asking that all guests do only one instructional match. You already went through Big Sis's line, didn't you?"

"A-Akira?! Who's this Akira?!"

That would be you.

"Trying to hide won't help. It's true that a lot more women are coming to Shogi events recently, but this one is full of geezers wanting to see all the new Women's League players everyone's talking about. You stick out like a sore thumb, Akira. Just give up and go eat something."

"But I want to receive My Lady's instructional lesson as well as Miss Hinatsuru's and Sora-sensei's! All of the professionals here have their own specialties, so I couldn't possibly choose a single one!"

"That doesn't change anything."

"Seeing my rival undergoing instructional lessons with other professionals makes me anxious! What if he's learning some invincible technique .....?"

"You have a rival?"

"Him, right there! That little brat!"

Akira points at the boy in grade school who she always plays against in the association's classroom. Today he's playing against Master Kiyotaki with a four-piece handicap right now.

Even though Ai Yashajin doesn't have to go to the association anymore after graduating from the Practice League, Akira still goes to the classroom on her days off to do instructional matches with pros and play against her rival as much as she can. She's completely hooked on Shogi.

"Listen, Akira. I'm really happy to see that you've taken an interest in Shogi, but——."

“Then you teach me, Kuzuryu-sensei! You don’t seem to be busy at the moment.”

“Say what?! Well, I .....

It’s true that I’m just walking around rather than doing instructional matches, but there’s a reason for it.

Just as I was trying to decide if I should explain it to her or not——.

“Excuse me, ma’am. I would be delighted to teach you if you’ll have me.”

A tall man in a tight-fitting suit walks over to us and greets Akira with a toothy smile.

“And you are?”

“A Sub League 3-*dan* who just happened to be passing by.”

“Th-3-*dan*?! That’s one step short of a full professional!!” she yelps in surprise.

The 3-*dan* passing by——Hiuma Kagamizu lowers his voice and ramps up the act.

“Well, well. You know of the Sub League ....., You’re no ordinary woman, are you, ma’am?”

“Hah! I know the Shogi world like the back of my hand. I even know the difference between professionals and Women’s League players!”

“Most impressive. In that case, you might be able to execute one of my secret techniques .....

“Really?! I won’t be satisfied unless it guarantees victory?!”

“Of course. Sub League members have mastered strategies amateurs don’t know exist. But, I’ll make an exception for you, ma’am.”

“A-an exception .....,!”

Akira is so excited I'm surprised blood isn't shooting out of her nose. Mr. Kagamizu drops his voice even lower.

"No one else can be allowed to see. I'll prepare a board for us on that table over there. Now, shall we?"

"Yesss! The classroom will be mine!!"

Already feeling stronger, Akira starts rotating her arms as she makes a beeline for the table.

I've got to hand it to Mr. Kagamizu, an event staff veteran like him knows exactly how to handle difficult guests. Unfortunately, that difficult guest is here because of me ..... *Sigh* .....

"..... Sorry about this, Mr. Kagamizu."

"It's fine. Titleholders stay away from instructional matches on purpose, yes? No one here thinks you are slacking off."

"Right, I could casually sneak in a few at Mr. Oishi's bathhouse classroom, but not when people like Zaou-sensei and Chairman Tsukimitsu are here ....."

"Guests would flock to titleholders and the most popular players, leaving lowly Sub League members like me with nothing to do. You are most gracious."

"Huh?! Mr. Kagamizu, please don't pray to me!"

"In all seriousness, the Shogi world exists as it is today because titleholders take pictures with fans and sign autographs for them. Even people who don't play are starting to take notice."

Exactly! That's why I'm just walking around the venue. I'm doing my duty as the Ryuo!!

"..... Well, fans haven't exactly been swamping you today from what I've seen ....."

"I know, right? I guess they're still mad at me for stopping the Meijin from



getting that Eternal Septuple title when everyone and their mother was rooting for him. I'm the villain now."

"Don't get so down on yourself. People don't hate you or anything ..... They're just a little scared."

"Scared? Of me?"

"Defeating the Meijin the way you did and staying unbeaten since then? Yaichi, do you know what people have been calling you recently?"

"Nah, I haven't really looked online ....."

I've always felt like the Internet's punching bag, but the entire country nailed me with a full combo after I fought against the Meijin. It was so traumatic I haven't been on the message boards in a while.

"Now that I think about it, Ayumu said something about that, too. What am I being called? It was always something like *trash* or *loli-con* up until now, but ..... Don't tell me it's gotten worse?!"

"..... Well, I'm sure you'll find out sooner or later."

I could almost see the argument play out on his face, but he didn't tell me in the end. Why? Does that mean it's something too embarrassing to say in person?!

I wanna know ..... But, the Internet is scary!

"Um ..... I'm sorry about this, Mr. Kagamizu."

Keika, who overheard our conversation, comes up to us and lowers her head in a deep bow.

"You've been so busy helping us manage the event, I hate to ask you to also take part in instructional matches——."

"Quite the opposite, Keika."

Mr. Kagamizu cuts her off in midsentence and gently smiles.

“As a Sub League member from the middle of nowhere living on his own, I can’t let job opportunities like this pass me by. I’m truly grateful that Kiyotaki-*sensei* always lets me know when plans are in the works.”

“Well, if you’re willing say it like that .....

For the most part, Sub League members are forbidden to do part-time jobs. The exceptions are for things that involve Shogi, like match recording and helping out at events like this.

Even so, Sub League members normally never show up at Shogi family celebrations like this one without being part of the family itself.

The fact that Master contacted him directly shows how much he trusts him as well as his hopes for Mr. Kagamizu in the future.

Though I’m sure coming to one of these celebrations as a Sub League member hurts.

But of course, there will be people who say, “If it hurts that bad, turn pro already!”

“Oi! How long are you going to stand around chatting?! Hurry up and teach me!”

“Yes, yes. I’m on my way, ma’am.”

Winking at Keika and I, Mr. Kagamizu walks over to the table where Akira is waiting.

“All right then! I’m going to do some instructional matches,” says Keika, enthusiastically pumping her arms.

“Someone has to cheer up the guests Ai and Ginko broke down!”

“For sure. Oh, Keika.”

“Yes?”

“Congrats.”

“..... Thanks.”

Watching Keika head over to the instructional match area, she’s positively glowing.

She’s always worked behind the scenes at Shogi events up until now. Just like Mr. Kagamizu.

But today, she gets to be up front, teaching the guests as a *Sensei*.

“..... I bet Master is thrilled. Now he can finally brag to everyone about his favorite daughter.”

Shogi is everything in the Shogi world.

No matter how nice you are, how smart or good-looking, no one cares if you don’t have the Shogi skill to compete. Trying to brag about anything else will get you nowhere.

Which means that Master has never been able to brag about Keika.

He could talk about me or Big Sis as much as he wanted even though we’re not connected by blood, but not his actual daughter. That had to have been rough.

—But now, he can brag about her anytime, anywhere.

The corners of my eyes heating up again, I try to discreetly wipe them as three young voices come up from below.

“Kujuryu-sensei! Congratulations!”

“Congratulations.”

“Congwatuwayshuns!”

I glance down to find the Grade Schooler Trio, Mio Mizukoshi (10), Ayano Sadato (10) and Charlette Isoir (probably 7), dressed in their fanciest clothes looking up at me.

Maybe they’re not used to big crowds? All three look antsy.

“You came! Thank you. Did you have a chance to do an instructional match? There’s a whole bunch of snacks over there——.”

“Um!”

Mio cuts me off as her face turns bright red.

“We brought ..... presents!!”

“Come again?”

All three hold out bags tied off with cute little bows at the same time. F-For me? Presents?

The one Charlette gives me is——.

“Oh, wow! A cloth board!”

Mio’s present is——.

“A piece bag? A nice one!”

The present Ayano holds out for me is——.

“And, this is a drawstring pouch to put it all in? Yep! Really cute, too!!”

Each of their personalities comes through. The fabric Ayano chose to make the pouch isn’t flashy, but the stitching is extremely precise. Mio’s has anime characters printed on it. The black stitches that make the grid on Charlette’s cloth board aren’t exactly straight but show how hard she tried to do something new and make it even more special.

Mio takes it upon herself to explain for the group.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*. You have to travel all around Japan for title matches, right? We wanted to help you practice Shogi no matter where you go, so we came up with this!”

“!! ..... T-Thank you .....!! So ..... much!!”

My already compromised tear ducts finally give out in that moment.

I just happen to have the cloth board Charlette gave me in my hand and use it to wipe my tears. There's a chance they could leave behind little white stains, but a quick wash should get rid of them later.

"I have to say, this cloth board is really soft and smooth. Feels great .....≡"

So great, in fact, I couldn't help but run it down my cheeks as I spoke. It would make the best face towel ever.

"*Sniff sniff* ..... Whoa, and it smells so nice .....≡≡≡ Both the texture and the smell are so soothing≡ Charlette, what kind of fabric did you use?"

"Pwantees."

..... Huh?

"You know, Cha? Cha wanted Masta to be hwappy! So Cha, Cha wanted to mwake her bwiggest pwantees into a Shogi bboard! Swoft and swmooth, oui? And Cha, Cha got wots of new pwantees, so Cha had wots and wots of old pwantees. Now they're Masta's Shogi bboard!"

"What? Pan ..... Huuuh?!"

"Guests receiving instructional matches and enjoying the festivities, please pardon the interruption. Our hosts for the evening would like to say a few words. Please direct your attention to the stage for a few moments."

Frozen like a statue with Charlette's handmade cloth board (panties .....?) against my cheek, and an announcement comes over the PA system and brings me back to reality.

That's right! I need to get up on stage!

Ai Hinatsuru comes skipping by, waving at me with a quick, "Master!"

"S-Sorry, everyone! I have to get going ..... Thanks ... for these!!"

Slipping the pant- ..... cloth board a grade school girl made for me into my pocket, I make for the podium and step in-between Big Sis and Ai Hinatsuru.

Big Sis keeps looking forward but buries her elbow in my side.

“You’re late. What kept you?”

“..... I was wiping my tears with panties.”

“What?”

“Representing the whole of the Kiyotaki Shogi family, Kousuke Kiyotaki would like to express his gratitude to everyone in attendance this evening.”

Ms. Oga hands the main microphone over to Master Kiyotaki before stepping aside. Then my Master steps forward to take center stage.

“Weeelp ..... I don’t mean to be lookin’ down on everyone sayin’ this but ..... Thank you for takin’ time out of yar busy schedules to attend my Shogi family’s celebration.”

Master gives a deep bow and the rest of us follow suit.

“It’s been eleven years now. My Shogi family started when Ginko Sora and Yaichi Kuzuryu here became my live-in apprentices. We became a small ..... truly modest, almost like a real family that all fit under one roof.”

Memories come flooding back as he speaks. My heart is close to bursting, again.

Big Sis must be feeling the same way next to me. Our eyes meet for a brief second, and it felt like our minds were in sync ..... That we’re both glad to have been his apprentices.

Then, Master goes on to talk about Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin.

“Those tiny apprentices of mine have gone on to defend their titles while one has raised two apprentices of his own into promisin’ Women’s League members. They’re real cuties, my granddaughters. I know I spoil them, but both are very talented young ladies and even ...! They’re in the runnin’ for titles themselves!”

My first apprentice starts bobbing up and down like she's got springs in her hips while my second makes a very graceful bow.

Ai Hinatsuru lost, but Ai Yashajin is advancing through the Mynavi Finals. Two more victories and she'll be in the Qualifier.

Waiting beyond that is—Queen Ginko Sora.

“It's hard to watch members of my own Shogi family fightin' for the same title. Probably somethin' close to what a grandparent feels watchin' their children and grandchildren have at it (haha).”

Warm laughter fills the room.

..... But for me, standing between the *child* and *grandchild* right now, it doesn't feel warm at all. The bouquet thing yesterday was hard enough .....

“However, thinkin' about it as a Shogi player, there's no greater honor for a Shogi family to have. The greatest feelin' in the world is watchin' your apprentices grow up. As a player, I'm grateful to them for showin' me that happiness can come from somethin' other than winnin'. Thank ya!”

Master's strong words of gratitude got a big round of applause from all over the room.

Once it died down, a gentler look appears on his face and he says, “And ..... If ya'll stick with this geezer for a moment, I have one more person to thank. The one who was there helpin' me raise those two apprentices, my daughter.”

“.....?!”

I bet she never thought she'd hear her named called tonight.

Keika watches, stunned, as Ms. Oga casually hands a bouquet of flowers to Big Sis who then presents them to her and says, “Congratulations.”

“Huh ..... What?”

Still not sure what's happening, Keika's eyes shrink into tiny little dots on her



face.

She stayed behind in Osaka to help set up this celebration.

The rest of us put our heads together and came up with this to surprise her.

“What are you standing around for, Keika? Go on, stand next to Master.”

“Wha-! G-Ginko?!”

With a rather forceful push from Big Sis, Keika wobbles her way to Master Kiyotaki’s side with the bouquet of flowers clutched in her arms.

Master then continues as if talking directly to her.

“She’s the one who truly raised Yaichi Kuzuryu and Ginko Sora. Bein’ a Shogi player means many late nights and travelin’ across the country. My daughter was there to take my place and raise the two of them like members of our family. And, all while fightin’ tooth and nail in the Practice League ..... I have no words for how grateful I am to her.”

That broke the dam, and tears start rolling down Keika’s face.

Even Master can’t keep his voice steady.

“Please allow me to introduce her to ya this evening. This is my daughter, Keika. Keika Kiyotaki ..... Women’s 3-*kyu*! As father and daughter, we ask for your continued support!!”

That got a bigger, warmer ovation from the crowd than I’ve ever heard in my life.

It was for Big Sis and I defending our titles, to congratulate the two Ai’s for joining the Women’s League and also for Keika, all at the same time.

But above all else, it was an enthusiastic round of applause for the player, father and man who has worked his fingers to the bone for the Kansai Shogi Association, Master Kiyotaki. I’m sure of it.

Standing on that stage and listening to the never-ending torrent of applause,

it was the best moment in our Shogi family's history.

But it would all come crashing down.

The incident that would take us from the highest peak to rock bottom was about to happen.

Once our stage greeting was over, it was time to go table to table and pour drinks for our guests.

“Thank ya so much for all the support. I’m Kousuke Kiyotaki.”

“Thank you very much! I’m Yaichi Kuzuryu!”

Master and I start at the head of each table, greeting the important people like a comedy duo in front of an audience and filling glasses one after another.

People are overjoyed when Big Sis and the girls just say hello, but we have to be entertaining despite all the cold shoulders thrown our way.

We told jokes, did tricks and even danced around in our underwear one time in the past.

Master was usually the one up front talking up a storm while I stood behind him, nodding and backing up everything he said like some paper tiger refilling glasses with beer ..... But today, our roles switched.

“Hey there! All-powerful Ryuo, I’ve been waiting for you!”

“Yaichi! Can I get a picture with you!”

I was surrounded by powerful, middle-aged men in no time at all. What’s more, they’re happy to see me.

“Finally, a Kansai player is back on top of the Shogi world!”

“It’s been far too long ..... Twenty years since that four-eyed demon stole the Meijin title from our beloved Seiichi Tsukimitsu .....”

“Yah, it’s been eons ..... But now, I die happy.”

I’m used to them yelling things like, “Try harder!” and “Beat the Meijin already, will you?!” in my face, but today I’m getting enough nice compliments

to make me queasy. Seriously, one guy is so happy to see me that he's in tears.

"Huh? Say what? Uhh .....?"

They aren't like the geezers who were totally plastered before I refilled their glasses ..... But these elderly men are definitely tipsy and I'm not sure how to handle them.

Never having been in the situation before, I look to Master for help, but .....

"....."

He stepped back after we finished our initial greeting.

Why? I thought to myself, but ..... He might be teaching me what I'll have to do in the future now that I've started a Shogi family of my own.

In that case, it's my duty as his apprentice to meet his expectations. I turn back to the men with a big smile on my face and join in their conversation.

"Uh-umm ..... Thank you. But I haven't exactly reclaimed the Meijin title ....."

"True, but Ryuo is higher rankin' than Meijin, in terms o' titles anyway. Meanin', Yaichi, ya're better in skill *and* title. Ipso facto, ya got the Shogi world checkmated, yeah?"

"Well ..... I guess."

As far as the hierarchy goes.

"My oh my, Yaichi. A 9-*dan* already? Now you're one of the big-wig *Senseis* right alongside your Master."

"No, no, no! I still have a long way to go ....."

Chancing a peek in Master's direction, he's keeping quiet and doesn't seem to want to jump in. So, he wants me to get through this on my own .....

The guests keep living it up and making even more claims.

"Alongside? He's already passed him up!"

“Darn right! Claimed a title when ol’ Kiyotaki never could!”

“All Yaichi has to do is beat him in a league match and *gratitude* is paid back in full!”

*Gah-hah-hah!* Laughter explodes from the group of old men. Sure, they’re sloshed, but that level of dark humor isn’t even considered dark here in Osaka.

Staying modest won’t bring this conversation to an end, so I join in.

“Ha ha ..... You’re right. So, by this time next year——.”

That was the final straw.

*WHAM!!* That sound hit my ears like a bowling ball.

Looking around to where it came from, I couldn’t believe my eyes.



It was the sound of my Master slamming his fists into the table.

“.....?!”

Silence fills the room as echoes bounce off the walls. The men standing around me are frozen in place, jaws hanging open in shock.

Then Master yells at me with red veins pumping in his eyes.

“Whad’ya mean *by next year*, ehh?! Ya sayin’ I’ll fall outta B-2, an’ ya gonna beat me in placement matches, are ya?! Well?!!”

In my ten years of living with him, not once has he ever been this furious at me.

But, it’s not just anger.

More like—— hostility.

“Some C rankin’ nobody takes a title an’ suddenly thinks he’s the best around ..... Who da hell do ya think I am?! I’d sooner retire than play in C!!”

Everyone in the room gasps when the word *retire* cuts through the air.

“And what was that yesterday at the Anointment Ceremony, ehh?! About *yagura* bein’ dead, was it?! Keep ya musin’s to yarself!!”

So, he did hear me .....

Man, I wish I could take that offhanded comment back.

Master is such a hard-core member of the Static Rook party that he forbade Big Sis and I from using Ranging Rook when we were younger. What’s worse, Master’s playing style is to build up defenses so thick it’s been nicknamed *ironclad*.

For him, *yagura* isn’t just his best strategy.

It’s life itself.

And, even though I wasn’t trying to hurt anyone, I flat-out rejected it .....

“*Yagura* is Shogi at its finest! People say gettin’ to Meijin without perfectin’ it ain’t happenin’! It’s Shogi’s righteous path! And *ya* go spittin’ on it .....!”

“No, but Master——.”

“Back talkin’, are *ya*? Then bring it on, Yaichi!!” Master roars as he slams his fists on the table again. “Wanna know who’s better? Let’s find out here and now where ever’body can see! Pros never turn tail from a challenge, eh!!”

“M-Master .....”

For a second, I thought Master had too much to drink.

But that wasn’t the case. He hasn’t had a single drop of alcohol today and couldn’t let this slide *because he isn’t drunk*.

It’s his pride as a player——pride in having challenged the Meijin causing all this.

As active players, Master is still ranked above me in terms of placement. Putting it another way, he’s closer to the title of Meijin than I am.

His pride as a pro couldn’t handle hearing that he’d been *passed up*, even in jest from some amateur guy.

Then again, that was probably just the last straw.

The root cause might run deeper than that.

——Could it be ..... Jealousy?

Finally realizing that I’ve been absentmindedly carving out pieces of my Master’s heart, regret slams into me like a brick wall.

Even if it’s just in idle chitchat, even if just joining the conversation, the words *alongside* and *passed up* are taboo when it comes to competitors who can still compete.

However, there’s a reason I can’t yield.

Because——I’m the Ryuo.



It's my duty as a titleholder to act like it. I'm in the higher position. That's especially true because the Ryuo is top title of them all. I couldn't even yield to the Meijin if I wanted to. I don't want to be stubborn. But, bowing out here would flip the Shogi world's hierarchy on its head and, even worse, be extremely rude to the sponsors.

Then, there's the fact that I'm not wrong about *yagura* in the first place.

As a pro, lying about my own Shogi convictions would go against who I am.

That's why I couldn't just lower my head to Master Kiyotaki. No one plays Shogi intending to lose. That would hold true if it were just the two of us, but in front of so many people in a place like this .....

"....."

Master and I silently stare each other down.

All the good vibes from before are completely gone. A backbreaking silence fills the room.

Knowing that saying the wrong thing here could lead to something they might never be able to take back, everyone is staying silent.

The one who breaks that hopeless ice is——

"Uhm, uhmm!"

Charlette, who made her way to Master's side at some point, says with an innocent little lisp.

"You know, Cha? Cha wants ta plway Shogi with masta's masta."

She tugs at his pants, asking him to play Shogi with her.

Did she think that he was inviting me to *play a match of Shogi* rather than picking a fight to settle the score .....

"Would'ya look at that! Whadda cute lil' challenger we got here."

The first one to react to what only the naïve Charlette could pull off was the

undisputed *Godfather* of Kansai Shogi, Tatsuo Zaou 9-*dan*.

“Kousuke. Ya can play yar apprentice any ol’ time. Take up this young’un’s offer for today,” Zaou-sensei says with a huge grin as he looks at my Master. Then he says, “Guests are startin’ to get restless. I think it’s ‘bout time fer some more instructional matches.”

The Don of Naniwa’s words are final.

Master breaks off eye contact with me.

“..... Young lady, shall we go play Shogi over there on that board?”

“Shogi, yaaay!!”

Charlette looks as happy as can be as she follows him there.

I scramble to put a smile back on my face and go to reassure Ai and the other grade schoolers. Big Sis and Keika take that as their queue to go around the hall and lighten the mood. Things are back to normal before long, almost like nothing ever happened. People are having fun again, but the elderly men who set off the whole thing are too scared to say much.

The celebration came to a close on that note, as if nothing happened at all.

With the one exception that Master and I didn’t say another word to each other for the rest of the night. We didn’t even look at each other.

# MASTER AND APPRENTICE

*“Sigh .....*”

This is an awkward ride home to say the least.

Worry is written all over Ai’s face in the back seat of the taxi right next to me as I just sit there, numb to the world.

*“..... Master? Umm ..... Uhh .....*”

“Yes. Everything’s okay ..... You don’t have to worry,” I say to calm my apprentice down, but those words were actually for me.

Saying them out loud is the only way I can hide how shaken I am.

“That’s the thing about Master Kiyotaki, the littlest things can set him off. Some really silly stuff made him boil over back when I was a live-in apprentice, so I’m used to dealing with it. Yep.”

That’s a lie.

Sure, he would flip his lid at the most meaningless things in day-to-day life, but the little things never once got him angry at either Big Sis or me when it came to Shogi.

..... While it is true that he peed out the window after losing to me in a non-league match last year, all players understand that pain and won’t blame him for it. So that doesn’t count.

“Master has a B-2 placement match coming up, you see. But he’s been busy the past few weeks going to Big Sis’s and my award ceremonies and setting up the party so he hasn’t had time to do any Shogi research. The pressure must be getting to him .....

“Isn’t Grandpa-*sensei* ..... having a hard time ... in the placement matches .....?”

“He sure is ..... It’s because he got a demotion point last season .....

“Demotion point?”

Ai tilts her head with a cute little *fumyuu* sound coming out of her mouth. That’s her “?” sign.

“The placement matches are built on a complex system. Each class has their own conditions for getting promotion points and demotion points.”

Out of all the different leagues, it’s the rules making up the placement matches that are hardest to understand.

It’s the result of rules being adjusted to match each era since they’re directly tied to a player’s lifeblood, league matches.

“I belong to the lowest ranking class, C-2. There are fifty of us in total. We get matched up against ten other members and those records determine which three players will get promoted.”

“Three?! That’s all?!”

“Well, going undefeated will get you promoted no matter what. If five of us don’t lose a single match, then all five will get promoted to C-1.”

“S-So strict .....

“It’s because there are so many of us. If five players go 9 wins 1 loss, then the two with the lowest placement won’t get promoted even though they had the same record.”

That’s what we in the Shogi world call *hitting the ceiling*.

“Um, Master? What placement .....

“It’s based on last season’s record. Players who came down from a higher class are at the top while the ones who promoted into that class start at the bottom.”

“That would mean all the professional *Senseis* have a placement, right?”

“Yep. That’s why they’re called *placement matches*.”

“That makes sense!”

..... Which makes my standing in the Shogi world strange because I stand at the top as the Dragon King Ryuo, but my placement is near the lowest of the low. I’m in both edges at once.

“And Master Kiyotaki is in class B-2. That’s third from the top. Only the top two can promote while the bottom five get hit with demotion points. Get two of those demotion points and you go down a class.”

Players get demoted from A and B-1 simply if they don’t win enough matches.

But all classes from B-2 and below have the point system, so players are guaranteed at least two years at that rank.

“Do demotion points stay with them forever?”

“Nah, they can get rid of them by either getting a winning record the next season or finishing at 50 percent two years in a row.”

“Win ..... half?”

Ai looks confused.

Getting through the Practice League with only a handful of losses and taking down high-ranking Women’s League players in the Mynavi Open like she did, the idea of breaking even might not seem so difficult. I mean, kids her age get stronger every single day, like sleeping is all the practice they need.

But that’s not true for Master.

Players his age start losing their Shogi sense as well as physical endurance. They have to work at least twice as hard as younger players to climb back up in the rankings once they start slipping .....

“Master Kiyotaki fought hard when he was in A, but he got demoted to B-1 the season right after he failed against the Meijin for the second time and

ended up falling all the way to B-2 the next season. Now that he's got a demotion point there, he could wind up in C-1 this year."

"He was winning in A not too long ago, so why can't he win in the lower classes? Is he in a slump ....."

"Part of it is his age, but ..... That's just how competitive the Shogi world is."

A is a battle of gods. It's where those who are in a league of their own gather to determine the best of the best.

That's not to say B and C are a cakewalk, though.

"B-1, especially, is so competitive, it's called the *Demon's Den*."

"Demons?!"

"It's a place where veterans with enough skill to be in A clash with up-and-coming younger players in a series of death matches. Labels like *former A Rank* or *challenged* the Meijin don't mean anything in there. Instead, they get hit with *demoted weaklings are weak* and other insults like that."

Losing all but one match in B-1, Master managed only two wins in B-2 the next year and got a demotion point.

His A ranking from only two years earlier didn't mean a thing.

That shock had to hurt ..... It's just ... Master always acted so cheerful back then and I didn't notice .....

"..... Could it be ....."

"? Could what?"

"..... Maybe, maybe he was already planning to retire ....."

"Huh ....."

"Tons of players would retire the moment they got demoted from A back in the old days. Master is pretty old-fashioned ..... And he's not just a former A ranking player. He's a Meijin Challenger."

Suddenly, I'm reminded just how much reverence Master has for the Meijin's position in the Shogi world.

It wouldn't be all that strange for him to think he wouldn't just ruin his reputation getting demoted like this, he would also damage the Meijin's reputation.

"B-But ... Grandpa-*sensei* wouldn't retire, would he? He's never said anything about it before."

"That's probably ..... my fault."

"Your ..... fault?"

"Yeah. I was in the 3-*dan* division, fighting for a chance to turn pro in junior high school the same year that Master got demoted from A. I think he didn't announce his retirement so I could focus on my matches."

Master has kept killing himself. All for my sake.

I've become Ryuo, defended my title and gone undefeated in the placement matches so far all thanks to him.

Despite that, I casually said that the one thing he treasured all his life was ..... How could he not get angry?

"That's exactly it. I was in the middle of a ten-match losing streak at this time last year, remember? But he kept cracking jokes, cheering me up ..... And then I ... damn it!!"

"Master ....."

Anger at my own stupidity boils over as I slam my fist down onto my knee. Ai looks at me with sadness in her eyes and holds my fist in her hands.

She didn't say a word, but the look on her face is saying *don't blame yourself* loud and clear. I let the muscles in my fist relax before gently placing that hand on my apprentice's head.

Eyes glistening like a little puppy, my apprentice jumps into my arms.

She's trembling, almost like she's afraid of being abandoned on the side of the road.

Seeing her like this, it suddenly clicks.

"..... Me, too ....."

"? You ..... too?"

"No, it's just ..... I'll probably react just like he did once you get stronger than me, Ai."

"Uwhee?!"

Ai flies off of me, almost literally, and shakes her head *no* as hard as she can.

"H-How could I ever be stronger than you, Master? There's no way!"

"But you're already better than me at Shogi puzzles."

"Shogi puzzles and Shogi on a board are different!"

..... So, she won't deny that she's better at puzzles than I am .....

This is the kind of straightforward honesty that makes kids so brutal.

Well, all players have this innocent brutality in them somewhere.

Sometimes it comes out like a breath of fresh air ..... Other times it can make a lot of people angry at you.

This girl, a jumble of innocent yet brutal honesty, youthful energy and talent, says, "I sure hope Grandpa-*sensei* wins!"

"..... So do I. Really."

My apprentice's straightforward, dazzling smile is just too bright for me, so I look out the window instead.

Seeing the Kansai Shogi Association out of the corner of my eye as we drive past, it looks more like some kind of eerie wild animal.



A fierce beast that feeds off Shogi players' misfortunes .....

## B-2 DIVISION 8TH MATCH

—Why'd I go an' do that .....?

Several days after the Shogi Family Celebration.

The events of that day still tormented Kousuke Kiyotaki as he played a placement match at the Kansai Shogi Association.

His opponent had just been promoted to B-2 the previous season, Kanto's promising young player Yuuya Kobotoke 6-*dan*.

The man was ten years older than his own apprentice, Yaichi, but reaching B-2 in his twenties was proof of his potential. Record currently sitting at 6 wins and 1 loss, his placement put him in a favorable position to compete for promotion at third from the top.

Kousuke was, of course, devoting his full attention to the match, however—.

“..... Haaa.”

Crossing his legs, he scratched his head and let out a long sigh.

Evening meal break long since passed, the *witching hour* late at night had arrived.

Thoughts of all varieties were beginning to seep into his lethargic and fatigued brain.

What truly afflicted him were memories of angrily yelling at his apprentice in front of their guests at the celebration.

Why did he say what he said given where they were .....? Why did he get angry in the first place? Kousuke couldn't figure it out for the life of him.

“Focus up, now! Focus!”

Scolding himself out loud, Kousuke shifted his attention back to the board.

—Won't make much difference, though. This match is already mine.

Today's match had evolved into a contest of *yagura* castles, which was Kousuke's specialty. The ebb and flow of offense and defense had stretched on for many hours, but now victory was finally within his grasp.

Yuuya was already setting the scene for surrender and now was the time to make the *memorable check* to seal the match.

—That there, this here, and ..... Yah, that'll do it with one move.

He couldn't deny that things didn't come as easily as when he was younger.

It took him longer to physically recover from long matches and there were times when his mental Shogi board got stuck in the middle of complicated sequences and he'd missed a checkmate or two.

If only he possessed the same kind of late game abilities that his granddaughter apprentice Ai Hinatsuru had at her disposal ..... Jealousy had crept in from time to time.

—But, it's all good once the engine gets goin'. I can still stop these youngens in their tracks!

Kousuke saw many veteran Shogi players lose matches that they had a ninety-nine percent chance of winning on one extremely bad move in the late game back when he was new to the professional ranks.

These were not the same as bad moves when the veterans just overlooked something or read the board incorrectly.

It was worse because they'd have a momentary lapse and forget how certain pieces worked or pick up the wrong piece from their piece stand ..... Losing in ways that only elderly Shogi veterans could.

"It's all right ..... Everything's all right," Kousuke whispered, reassuring himself in many different ways.

Age hadn't taken a toll on him yet. He could still dominate an up-and-coming

twentysomething like he was doing right now. Not only would today's victory provide the foothold that would keep him in B-2, it would also send a message to his rivals watching his match on the live feed. *Kousuke's still in his prime.* They would all know it after today. What's more, all of the *trust* he had built up as a pro would get a considerable boost with this victory.

Kousuke looked up from the board and addressed the match recorder.

"Kagamizu. How much I got left?"

"One hour and fourteen minutes."

"Alright ..... Thank ya."

That was more than enough time to read all the way to checkmate.

—I've won for sure. Except, I can't let my guard down.

Readjusting his posture to sit on his ankles, Kousuke focused on the board for one last read.

And—.

"Oh?"

A move he hadn't seen before caught his eye, a fantastic move.

— Overlookin' a beauty like that ..... It'd be the perfect way to finish this.

Kousuke thought with a grin and decided to change course. This finishing blow would be tonight's exclamation mark, a blaze of glory that would simultaneously restore his relationship with his apprentice and raise his spirits.

"Huuh?!"

Yuuya looked at the board several times in disbelief once Kousuke snapped the piece in place.

However—the young man gave no signs of surrender.

Confused, Kousuke set to reading the board one more time.

“Agh .....?!”

It felt as though every drop of blood in his body had vanished.

Checkmate in one.

What Kousuke thought to be his crowning moment actually was *an extremely bad move that left him open to checkmate*.

“..... Pardon me,” said Yuuya Kobotoke in a wispy voice as he put Kousuke Kiyotaki’s King into checkmate with an apologetic look in his eyes.

“.....”

Kousuke looked to the heavens and placed his hand on his piece stand, signaling his intent to surrender.

The victory that was in his grasp had slipped through his fingers ..... by making a mistake that could only be explained by forgetting how pieces work, a truly pathetic way to lose.

## SCARS OF BATTLE

On the day B-2 was holding placement matches.

I left Ai with Keika and came to the association once I was sure dinner break was over.

The reason I went out of my way to make sure is simple, so I wouldn't accidentally bump into Master.

Poking my head into the Player's Room, the mood flips like a light switch. Everyone in here saw what happened between me and my Master the day before yesterday, so that's a given.

At the same time, no one is bringing it up. Honestly, I'm glad.

Everyone huddled around the analysis boards is saying that Master has a good lead and things will only get better ..... After a while, I relax enough to start cracking jokes.

Indeed, it looks like Master has this one in the bag with every passing move.

Just one more move. Play it, and there'll be no way he can lose—.

But the horrible way it ended has everyone around the boards frozen in disbelief.

"H-How .....?"

I was so sure he was going to win that I couldn't believe my eyes when he lost.

Sure, it was the late game, but to be checkmated with that much waiting time left ..... Checkmated in one.

It's like he forgot which way the pieces go. That's the way amateurs lose.

"Master ..... H-How could Master lose like that .....?"

Pro players have a *sense* about how pieces move.

It's hard to explain with words, it's impossible for us to *overlook* something that simple. Because we figure out what we're doing next in our heads without *looking*.

"Kiyotaki-*sensei*, losing like that hurts ....."

"..... Do you think maybe something's seriously wrong with his health ....."?

"His ranking's pretty low from last season because of that demotion point ..... One more loss might be enough to get him demoted again ....."

"*The Kiyotaki-sensei*, demoted again? He was the Meijin Challenger five years ago, remember?"

"His Shogi hurts to watch these days ....."

Whispers start circulating all around the Player's Room. The air in here is completely different from the usual fiery intensity. It's more of a worn-out tension, harder to breathe ..... That's what it's like toward the end of the placement matches and it's already starting.

That's Master's seventh straight loss in the placement matches. He's only won one.

The chance Master will be demoted just went up even more.

If he was serious about what he said at the celebration, then ..... it would mean retirement is starting to feel real.

"! Master .....!!"

Getting worried, I completely forget about how our current situation would make things awkward and dash out of the Player's Room.

Racing up the stairs, I notice someone coming down.

It's Mr. Kagamizu.

Since he was the recorder for Master's match, he must be on his way to the

third-floor offices to submit the results.

“Mr. Kagamizu! Umm .....

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s ..... about my Master. How is he? Does he look angry? Did he decline a review session?”

“Nope. He did it with a smile.”

“Come again?”

I have no idea what to say.

A smile? Even though he lost?

After losing like that ..... Master is smiling?

“Well, it didn’t start out that way. I don’t blame him for being depressed after getting checkmated the way he did .....

A grimace passes over his face as if recalling the exact moment it happened.

“But, he had a smile on his face halfway through the review session. His opponent read between the lines and let Kiyotaki-*sensei* have the floor, nodding in agreement to everything he said. So, I’m sure he’s fine.”

“If you think so .....

“Kiyotaki-*sensei* is a veteran, an experienced one at that. He’ll forget all about losing after a few rounds of sake,” says Mr. Kagamizu before giving me a reassuring pat on the shoulder and continuing down the stairs.

Yes ..... He’s right.

Master is three times my age and has been a pro for over thirty years. It’s not like this is the first time he’s been hit with a checkmate in one.

But, most importantly——.

“He’s an adult.”



Yeah. Master is an adult. He's not some teenager like Big Sis or me, and certainly not a kid like Ai Hinatsuru. Adults have ways of controlling their emotions and their hearts are tough as nails. Adults don't pout or cry.

I bet I'm just overthinking the retirement thing, too.

What he said at the celebration was just in the heat of the moment, our war of words pushed him that far. Even if he falls to C-1, Master will keep going like he always has.

So, everything's fine! There's nothing for me to worry about.

Reassured, I was about to go back to the Player's Room, but——.

“..... Maybe I should go say hello.”

This might be the chance I need to smooth things over between us. If all goes well, he might end up saying something like: *Sorry 'bout the other day. Came to watch, did ya? As long as ya're here, let's go grab a bite.*

Hopes soaring, I turn on my heel and head back toward the arena.

Fifth floor—— the Black Corridor is silent and still.

I recognize the pair of worn-out black leather shoes sitting on the shelf outside.

Yeah, those are Master's shoes. They're the only ones left.

“That means the review session is over, doesn't it? Well ..... after what happened.”

His opponent wouldn't have much to say. He must have cleared out pretty quick. I wouldn't have seen him if he took the elevator.

—— ..... Okay then, why is Master still here?

Getting a sense that something wasn't right, I take my shoes off as quietly as possible.

Just as I did, a weird sound came through the door.

“? ..... What’s that?”

It’s not pieces.

..... *Sniffle, sniffle*. More like a runny nose.

Like when someone’s crying.

Board and pieces long since put away, someone is crying in there with the lights shut off.

It’s Master.

He’s all by himself, hunched over under a single lamp ..... Crying.

A few words made it through the painful sobs.

“..... Mulligan ..... Mulligaaan .....”

Careful not to make a sound, I left as quickly as I could. There are certain things an apprentice should never see, and this is one of them.

It’s obvious which move he wants the *mulligan* for, the move he wants back.

No one can outgrow the pain of losing, being an adult doesn’t matter at all. Time doesn’t dull the pain no matter how old Shogi players get so long as they still play Shogi.

Tonight reminded me of that fact.



# POSTAL

RECORD 2

HIUMA  
KAGAMIZU

- OCCUPATION: Sub League member  
(3-dan)
- HOMETOWN: Miyakonojo City,  
Miyazaki Prefecture
- FAVORITE  
THING: Hip Hop Music
- LEAST FAVORITE  
THING: Prodigies



# MASTER KIYOTAKI: RUNAWAY

“Master isn’t home yet?”

“No, he’s not. I have no idea where he’s gotten to.”

Morning after the B-2 placement match.

I dropped by Master’s place to pick up Ai only to find Keika with a troubled look on her face as she brought me up to speed on the situation.

“My word, he’s over 50 and still embarrassing himself ..... Ai is only 10 but she was up with the sun, did some cleaning and laundry and is now covering for my father in the classroom.”

“Well, you know. Placement matches are rough .....”

Nobody would feel like coming straight home right after playing Shogi for over 13 hours straight only to lose. Keika knows all about that, but she’s probably just so worried that she has to complain to someone and I happen to be here.

Neither she nor I bring up what happened at the Award Ceremony.

Nothing about the shocking checkmate in one, nothing about Master using the “r” word, nothing at all.

While we’re talking, Big Sis shows up in her pajamas, wiping the sleep out of her eyes.

She obviously just woke up. Groggy, the prickly aura she usually gives off is nowhere to be found.

She looks totally vulnerable and kind of cute with her other arm hanging at her side ..... That is, until she sees me. Her aura shoots out at full blast like she flipped a switch as she snaps her tongue.

“..... You.”

Then she disappears into the guestroom.

Keika forces a smile and says, “She was here analyzing father’s placement match until late last night ..... She won’t say it out loud, but it seems she was worried enough about him to wait here.”

“Yeah. That sure sounds like Big Sis.”

The two of us used to stay up late and analyze Master’s placement matches in real time all the way to the last move back when we lived here as his live-in apprentices. We’d pretend we were pros too, battling our way through the league with more waiting time than any other, the most intense matches in the Shogi world ..... To put it a different way, it felt like we were fighting alongside Master.

We called it the *placement match game*.

No one told us we had to, but our childish minds considered it to be our duty as his apprentices.

That and placement matches are directly linked to a Shogi player’s life as a whole.

Get demoted enough times in the placement matches and you will end up retired. Looking at it from the other angle, placement matches are the only league matches that are directly connected to retirement. That’s the biggest difference between them and the other leagues.

What’s more——.

“Dropping down a class cuts into your salary, remember? I may have joined the Women’s League, but it’s still pretty much the same as not getting paid at all ..... It’s been so hard to keep the classroom running the past few years.”

Master has been a Meijin Challenger twice and has 9-*dan*. That’s enough to make him a mainstay in Kansai Shogi. With a resume like that and his

popularity, Master should be bringing in plenty of income outside of just playing matches.

Judging big tournaments around Osaka, instructing Shogi teams and clubs, working as an observer for title matches, the list goes on.

However, Master usually passes the cushy jobs like that onto other Kansai players.

Instead, he takes the jobs that no one wants to do, like promoting Shogi around the country. That's how I met him for the first time, when he was judging a small tournament deep in the mountains of Fukui Prefecture doing just that.

That's who he is. That's my Master.

Which is exactly why ..... I wanted to be Kousuke Kiyotaki's apprentice.

"Should I take over in the classroom? If it's just this once, no one'll find out—," I say to Keika, determined to show my gratitude for everything Master's done for me, but ...

"Actually, go find him. He probably drank in Minami somewhere, knowing him."

"Find him? Master?"

"You know where he likes to go, right Yaichi? It's been the live-in apprentice's job to track him down after long nights of drinking since way back when."

"Well ..... That's true, but ..."

"I can handle the classroom and I've got Ai to help me out."

"Ai, yeah."

It's Saturday, so she doesn't have school. And, now that she's officially a member of the Women's League, there shouldn't be an issue about her being paid to play Shogi. But still .....

“You wouldn’t believe how popular she is. The older customers fawn all over her and Ai’s school is pretty close to here, so her classmates drop by saying they want to start playing as well. Oh, we have young customers who just started playing Shogi online, too——.”

“Huh? Young customers? You’re talking about young men, aren’t you? So, more and more young men are showing up with their sights set on Ai? They’re all loli-cons! You were just going to watch them close in on her without saying a word?! Why?! They’re dangerous!!”

My face flushes redder with every word. That’s when Big Sis steps out of the guestroom fully dressed and says like the crack of a whip, “From an objective standpoint, Yaichi, you’re shadier than all of them. Loli-king.”

“Ngh .....!”

I’ve got ..... no comeback!

*Clap!* Keika claps her hands together.

“Ginko, your timing is perfect. Take Yaichi and go find father.”

“No. Why do I have to drag this loli-con along with me——?”

“Oh, my my. You’re all dolled up, Ginko. What’s the occasion?”

“Occasion? This is normal.”

“I wonder. Say, Yaichi, what do you think of Ginko this morning?”

Big Sis isn’t wearing her usual sailor-style school uniform. She’s in street clothes.

Definitely not one of these fancy, haughty outfits that Ms. Shakando made her wear, these are casual. Big Sis really stands out right now because this isn’t how she normally is.

“Those clothes fit really nice, and they’re pretty cute. I like that look.”

“.....!”



Big Sis blushes bright red right before kicking me in the shin. That hurts, just like normal.

Did giving her a compliment piss her off somehow? Man, Big Sis is a monster when she gets up.

“Nooow, I see. Teeheehee♪”

Keika leans down and peeks up at Bis Sis’s red face and says, “Yaichi thinks you look *cute* in regular clothes, Ginko. He *likes* them, too. Isn’t that great!”

“Your ..... humph.”

Big Sis gives up on one of her usual *your head on a pike* threats and falls silent. Keika, however, seems to be enjoying herself.

“All right, it’s settled. Go look for father together. Oh, and yes. Take his wallet from him when you do find him and send him home in a taxi. After that, go and enjoy yourselves on a date. After all, you two don’t usually have days off at the same time!”

“Huuuh?! D-date .....?”

“A date, walking around Minami with Yaichi? Quit joking. That’s a punishment.”

You didn’t have to go that far.

“You could swing through Second Avenue in Dohtonbori if you want to!” Keika says, flashing a grin.

There’s an area of *those* hotels along Second Avenue in Dohtonbori.

I’m sure she’s joking, but ..... Since we’ve already been to one before, thinking about that night makes the situation quite a bit more awkward.

Keika can joke around like this because she doesn’t know, but Big Sis said she flat out *hates me* to my face that night ..... Nggghhh .....

Big Sis mumbles.

“..... You’ve been acting a lot like Master recently, Keika.”

“Really? How so?”

“Like a geezer.”

“A ge .....?!”

Big Sis leaves Keika frozen on the spot and heads off toward the station. Worried about Keika, I hang back for a second before following her out the door.

## COUPLE'S SOUP

Namba.

Only 10 minutes away from Master's place in Noda on the Hankyu Line, it's one of several entertainment districts in Osaka and one of the biggest tourist destinations in western Japan. Whenever an Osakan says *Minami*, they're talking about the southern area around Namba.

Shinsaibashi is just to the north, and Nipponbashi is a short walk to the south. Go a bit further south and you'll find Tsutenkaku Tower standing over Shinsakai, which is also called *New World*. That's the lay of the land.

"We haven't been here in ages."

"Well, everything we need is in Umeda, so ....."

Also known as *Kita*, the area around Osaka station called Umeda is where the young people go. The Shogi Association is walking distance away from Osaka station in Fukushima. That's why the younger generations of Shogi players choose to go north to Kita.

Compared to all the new, fancy buildings lining the streets in Umeda, Minami is a jumble of old shops and bars with no rhyme or reason at all.

Then again, this disorderly mess probably fits more with Osaka's reputation.

Crowds of tourists are filling the streets and it's only mid-morning.

Back when I lived with my parents in Fukui, I thought all of Osaka was going to be just like this, crowded and over-the-top signage as far as the eye can see. Signs like the Glico Marathon Runner.

"So, where should we start looking?"

"Let's see ..... How about over by the river?"

“The Dohtonbori River? Would Master go that way?”

“If he went with the flow.”

“?! ”

That, that would mean he’s dead .....

“Wouldn’t it be faster to start with Ebisu Bridge or Center-Machi? That’s where all the bars are.”

“Well, maybe, but .....

Big Sis frowns.

“The shopping arcades are roofed in over there ... I don’t want to have to walk through those crowds. There’s nowhere to escape .....

“It’s true you do stick out, Big Sis.”

Successfully defending the Ryuo title made me kind of famous, but that’s nothing compared to Big Sis’s popularity right now. Not even close.

Now that she’s the first female 3-*dan* ever, she’s on TV almost every day. Walking into a big crowd like this on a weekend is just asking for trouble ..... Just when I was starting to get worried about her.

*Squeeze.*

Big Sis wraps her arm around mine and presses her cheek against my shoulder.

“Hey?! B-Big Sis .....?”

“Just so I don’t get hit on. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

Her voice is so prickly she may as well be breathing cactuses.

“People will think we’re together, walking around like this, right? Turning down every single person that comes up to me would get annoying ..... That’s all .....

“I, uh, I see .....

“.....” (*squeeze*)

Anyone looking at us now would just think it's just PDA.

I mean, we're both wearing street clothes, so no one would ever guess we're actually Shogi players. Big Sis's silver hair makes her look like a junior high student on a rebellious streak.

Part of me is in awe going, “Big Sis is so smart,” but the other part of me is saying, “Wouldn't people seeing us walking arm in arm in Osaka give them a different wrong idea?” Back and forth over and over ..... But I can't say anything.

Who could ever say no to a cute girl clinging so close .....

“Y-You're right. There're too many people! Yeah?”

“..... Don't they have better things to do?”

We arrive at Ebisu Bridge, Big Sis still pressed against me as the Glico sign comes into view.

This spot is so well known for pickups and catcalls that people have dubbed it *Pickup Bridge*. Right now, though, it's pretty quiet because it's still early.

Most of the people crossing the bridge right now are tourists, student groups and, you know, ..... couples.

Also, there are quite a few old guys with big sketch pads. Maybe they're part of an art class? It's a strange sight to see.

We lean out over the guardrail to get a higher vantage point and look around.

“Any luck, Big Sis? You see Master anywhere?”

“I don't think he's here.”

You're not trying to look, are you .....?!

“But Master usually sticks to the same places, doesn’t he?”

Then, why are we here? ..... Is what I should’ve asked, but it’s my fault for just following her willy-nilly. I kinda wanted to see what going on a date felt like .....

“To Hozenji Yokochō.”

“You got it.”

Go into the shopping arcade from the Ebisu Bridge entrance and Hozenji Temple is right there.

It’s a small temple devoted to the Buddhist deity Fudo and all the bars around here seem to have a great deal of faith in it.

Say *Hozenji* and *zenzai* soup is the first thing people think of.

It was in some book? Maybe a movie? A long time ago, but now a whole bunch of *zenzai* restaurants have set up shop in the area.

One of them is called *Meoto Zenzai*, which means something along the lines of *soup for couples*. There are small red lanterns hanging out front.

That’s where Big Sis decides to come to a sudden halt.

“I’m tired.”

“Already?! We’ve only been walking for five minutes?!”

“I’ll be waiting in this restaurant, so you go find Master, Yaichi.”

“All by myself?! I’d rather eat *zenzai*, too!!”

“..... Then why don’t you?”

And so, our search for Master was put on pause for the time being.

The restaurant is pretty cramped inside, but luckily there’s an open table.

It looks like most of the customers right now are foreigners. I guess they’re not used to traditional Japanese clothes because they’re taking more pictures of the restaurant’s kimono-wearing staff with their smartphones than the food.

I sit across the table from Big Sis and get our order in right away.

“Hot and cold *zenzai*, one of each.”

Those two things are all this place serves, so there’s no point looking at the menu. On the other hand, the food comes right away because the menu is so small.

Two bowls of hot *zenzai*, two bowls of cold *zenzai* and a plate of salted *konbu* kelp arrive at our table.

It doesn’t add up, does it? But, that’s right at this place.

I look over at Big Sis and say, “It’s pretty rare that one serving is two bowls, don’t you think?”

“Really?” she replies, “I’ve only ever eaten *zenzai* at this restaurant, so .....

“Now that you mention it, me too ..... Oh, and when it comes out for snacks served during title matches. *Zenzai*.”

Chewy, white dumplings in a sweet soup.

Cake could never be compared to the harmonious collaboration of soft and flaky sweet bean soup with the slippery white dumplings. That’s what makes Japanese sweets so awesome! Love it!

“Ahhh, good stuff! *Zenzai* is the best,” I say with a smile.

“..... It’s always a relief, seeing it at snack time during title matches.”

“I know, right! I can’t taste anything during the match, but the texture is there. I like rolling the dumplings against the roof of my mouth and feeling them push back against my teeth. It’s relaxing, I guess.”

Master might have come this way looking for exactly that, a way to relax. It’s hard to change gears on your own after fighting in a placement match all the way through the night .....

Master always comes to Minami to drink after his matches.

It was standard for Big Sis and I to go look for him the next day if he wasn't home by lunch.

Since Master always went to bars owned by Shogi fans, they'd let him crash on a couch or something once he got too drunk to stand.

Then, once we found him, he'd give us an embarrassed smile while holding his head with a hangover and say, "*No tellin' Keika, ya hear?*"

With that, he'd bring us to Meoto Zenzai and buy us whatever we wanted to eat. A bribe, obviously.

"Whatever we wanted, sure, but there are only two things on the menu," Big Sis remarks.

"Well, now ..... Don't forget about the iced *zenzai* in summer," I remind her.

Iced *zenzai* is basically like a messy snow cone in a bowl.

We'd order one topped with Big Sis's favorite green tea sauce along with hot and cold *zenzai* to split.

The hot and cold *zenzai* was fine because we each got our own bowl, but the amount of iced *zenzai* I got depended entirely on Big Sis's mood.

More often than not, I'd only get to sip the sweet melted ice in the bottom of the bowl ..... What am I, a bug?!

"I really liked the cake at Café American," Big Sis says nostalgically as she goes back and forth between the bowls of hot and cold *zenzai*.

"That was a nice place. We should go there again for old time's sake sometime."

"Do you think so too, Yaichi?"

"Yeah. The waitresses had cute uniforms."

"....."

Café American is pretty famous around here.



The inside is designed to look like a 1970s cabaret with retro stuff literally hanging on the walls ..... The atmosphere is for adults, through and through.

Master would buy me dessert or something as he sipped coffee and watched all the pretty waitresses go about their business to soothe his fighting spirit ..... Players need a way to relax, so there's nothing pervy about it. Nothing at all.

"The coffee that Master always drank had whiskey in it! Did you know?"

"Of course. It was on the menu."

"He always said *the best thing for a hangover is liquor!* but do you think he was okay drinking that much? I mean, he'd eat less and less the more he drank ....."

"....."

Big Sis sips her *zenzai* soup without saying a word. I realized how awkward that was as soon as the words left my mouth.

—If he were okay, we wouldn't be out here looking for him.

Regretting bringing it up, I look over at Big Sis and say in a brighter tone, "Not bad, eh?"

"Yes. Just like I remember."

I forgot I was addressing my older sister apprentice for a moment there, talking to her without the usual respectful tone, but she didn't get angry at me. That by itself makes me happy.

It was almost noon by the time we finished our *zenzai*.

I stand up to go pay the bill.

And I happen to see they're selling *zenzai* mix next to the register.

"That would make a good treat ..... I'll pick some up to take home."

"You like it that much?"

“Nah, I was thinking it would be good for the next Grade Schooler Practice Group session.”

“.....”

“Wait, do kids these days even like *zenzai*? Ai’ll know.”

I pull out my smartphone and type out “Do elementary school students eat *zenzai* nowadays?” into the messenger app.

I thought Ai would be busy helping out at Master’s classroom, but the READ notification popped up right away. Maybe she’s on lunch break? Her answer comes back almost immediately.

“*Zenzai*? I like it, but ..... Why are you bringing up *zenzai*?”

She added a cute cat stamp with a “?” over its head. The adorable thing makes me smile.

“Give me that.”

“Ah!”

Just as I was about to reply, Big Sis snatches my phone out of my hand like fixing a wrong move on the board at the last second and types out.

“At Meoto Zenzai in Hozenji now (^o^) I’ll get a little something for you!”

Then she smiles from ear to ear, something she never does, and takes a picture of the two of us before sending it right along with the message.

That’s a declaration of war.

“GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAASP!!”

I grab my phone back and desperately race to cancel the message, but it was no use. As soon as the READ letters popped up on the screen, I knew the damage could never be undone .....

“Hey! W-What was that for?! Ai won’t understand you’re joking around, so seriously, please don’t!!”

“.....” (Humph)

“You can’t just ignore me when I’m—?! Hey, you took my *konbu*! How am I supposed to get all this sweet out of my mouth without it?!”

The salty splash of *konbu* after eating sweet *zenzai* can’t be beat .....! Saying that I was looking forward to eating *konbu* after *zenzai* more than anything today wouldn’t be an overstatement! And now, it’s gone .....!

Big Sis knows that I like to nibble on *konbu* on the way home after leaving the restaurant, so she took that bit of happiness away from me on purpose! What a demon .....!

“Damn it! You’re evil! A witch! You knew I’d let my guard down, clinging to my arm like that! And I fell for it!!”

“..... Look who’s talking. Just when I thought we were having a good time together ..... And all you think about is that little girl .....”

Big Sis mumbles something, but I couldn’t hear her at all.

That’s when my phone buzzed.

It’s Ai’s response.

I-is she angry? Or ..... Maybe she’s sad?

What do I do if it says, *Come home and explain yourself right away!* or *I’m never letting you inside the apartment again!* .....? My hand is vibrating even harder than the phone. Terrifying.

But Ai will get even angrier at me if I don’t respond to her message within three seconds of reading it. That’s our three second rule. It’s set in stone.

Scared out of my mind, I look at the screen.

“I’m outside.”



## A SINGLE KNIFE

After nearly tripping over my own feet getting out of the restaurant, I find my 10-year-old apprentice waiting outside posing with her hands behind her back with an unnaturally large smile on her face.

Even worse, she looks cute enough to throw out my back glancing up at me as she asks, “Master? Did you come out here to eat *zenzai* with Auntie while your apprentice was working hard at the classroom waiting for you to pick her up?”

She’s so cute I could die.

But ..... She’s scaring me ..... to death!!

“And, what is this restaurant, exactly? Meoto Zenzai? That means *couple*, right? So, that’s how you write that word in Chinese characters.”

“L-look, I didn’t have a choice! Master Kiyotaki has gone missing and Keika sent me out to go look for him ..... Yes, Keika! If you just ask Keika, she’ll tell you——.”

“Keika is reflecting on what she’s done,” Ai says the scariest thing in the world with a happy, little smile. That fear is what’s keeping me from asking exactly what *reflecting* means.

Big Sis follows me out of the restaurant (she must have picked up the check). Her mouth starts nervously twitching the moment she sees Ai and I don’t blame her.

“..... How did you get here so quickly?”

“Didn’t you know? There’s a GPS tracking chip in Master’s phone.”

“Huh?!”

Big Sis and I scream in unison. T-tracking chip?!

That means ..... She already knows about the two of us going to *that place* in Sakuranomiya?!

“I’m only joking. And, since I’m not a Shogi piece, I can’t appear anywhere I want like coming off a piece stand. I was planning to come here for lunch anyway.”

“In Hozenji?”

“Yes. I’m meeting my father in front of the *Splashing Fudo*.”

“Your father?”

My voice overlaps with Big Sis once again. .... What is going on?

“T-this is the Splashing Fudo?!”

Turn right out of Meoto Zenzai’s front door and the Splashing Fudo is right there.

Ai can’t hide her surprise once she sees the stone statue standing in the middle of a small, shrine-like pedestal.

“Yep. Not what you expected, is it? Caked in moss like that.”

Seriously, the whole stone statue is covered in green moss from head to toe.

You can barely make out the shape of a person, but it’s the famous Splashing Fudo.

“Fudo is a god of commerce and entertainment, so you can ask him to improve your Shogi skills if you want. That’s one of the reasons Master Kiyotaki used to bring us here.”

“Really .....?!”

“Since we’re already here, might as well pay our respects.”

I grab one of the ladles set out in front of the statue and scoop some water

out of the nearby basin.

It's up on a pedestal, so I have to fling the water a little bit to reach the statue and, just like the name, it makes a splash.

"I just need to put water on it?"

"Want to try?"

"Y ..... Yes!"

Taking the ladle from my hand, Ai gets up on her tiptoes.

"Haah! Haaah!"

*Splish. Patter.*

Some droplets of water make it to the statue's legs, but most fall short.  
Adorable≡

"..... That was pathetic. Give it here."

Big Sis snatches the ladle out of Ai's grasp, scoops up more water and douses the statue with a *plooosh!*

"A-are you supposed to use that much?!"

"Hahaha. This is Osaka. Overdoing everything is how it's done."

"But, now, I'll be a stronger Shogi player, right Master?! Does it do anything else?"

"I think it helps with *relationships*, too."

"!!"

In that moment, a lightning bolt of tension shot to the air around us, one stronger than any before.

"I'll splash it again, the right way this time!! Please move!!"

"You're the one in the way, pipsqueak."

Ai picks up another ladle and tries to force her way to the statue, but Big Sis

blocks it with the one in her hand. For some reason, it turns into a sword fight from there. The battle has begun!

“H-hey you two! Fudo will punish you, treating the ladles like that?!”

“Huh? Want your head on a pike?”

“Whose fault do you think it is this is happening in the first place? He’ll be angry at you.”

While I have no idea exactly whose fault it is, I apologize just to be safe. Sorry .....

“But, how long has it been all mossy like this?”

Ladle still at the ready, Ai wonders out loud as she tilts her head toward the Fudo statue. That’s when——.

“It was already like that when I started my training here.”

“Daddy!”

“You don’t look any worse for wear, Ai,” says Takashi Hinatsuru with a clumsy laugh. He’s Ai’s father.

Gently embracing his daughter as she jumps into his arms, he gives me a respectful nod.

“Kuzuryu-*sensei*, Sora-*sensei*, it’s nice to see you again.”

“H-hi there .....

I throw my head down as quickly as I can, and Big Sis silently returns the bow.

This reunion is nice and all, but what is he doing all the way out here in Hozenji? ..... Just before I could ask, Mr. Hinatsuru’s eyebrows jump as if he just remembered something and says, “Kiyotaki-*sensei* is resting at the bar. Please, follow me.”



The *bar* Mr. Hinatsuru led us to was right next to Hozenji Temple itself.

The Shouben Tanbatei, a *Japanesey* place that also serves food.

Obviously, I did a double take as soon as I heard the name.

“*Sh-shoben? As in going number one?*”

“Actually, it means *to correctly distinguish right from wrong*. But, the name does appeal to the Osakan sense of humor.”

Stepping through the curtain-less door, the kitchen staff are busy prepping for the day. Several men wearing white bandannas are working hard without saying a single word.

Mr. Hinatsuru motions us to take a seat at the counter and all three of us sit down in a row. I’m in the middle, so it’s less than comfortable. I’m squeezed in pincerlike. Eager to get out of here as soon as possible, I cut to the chase.

“So, where’s Master?”

“Snoozing on the second floor. I’ll have someone go up and get him.”

Giving orders to someone on the staff, he steps up behind the counter across from us and pours three cups of tea.

“Now then, I’ll explain from the beginning——.”

“We already know. Master drank himself to sleep here, right?” says Big Sis bluntly.

Mr. Hinatsuru just smiles and doesn’t say another word.

There is another question that needs asking. I take a sip of my tea and bring it up.

“If I may ..... Mr. Hinatsuru, what are you doing in Hozenji?”

“I trained to become a chef right here in this very kitchen. Hozenji Yokochō is hallowed ground for us culinary artisans.”

“Say what?!”

“The man who owns this bar ..... And my Master, by the way, fell ill a few days ago. There weren’t enough people to cover for him, so I came to help out.”

He pauses for a moment before saying, “Oh, yes,” like something popped into his head. “Do you know the song *Moon Over Hozenji Yokochō*? It’s the story of a young chef living and working in Hozenji Yokochō who journeys forth to continue his training elsewhere with only a single knife at his side.”

“Beats me.”

“Sorry, but I don’t .....”

Big Sis and I tilt our heads to the side.

“R-really ..... Well, it is an older song, after all .....”

Mr. Hinatsuru’s shoulders sink, looking dejectedly at the floor and taking a deep breath before continuing his story.

“My journey began here at Honzenji when I was in training, too. A request for young chefs came in from an inn on the North Coast. They were understaffed and looking for temporary help, a six-month contract to be exact. I must’ve been 25, maybe?”

“Was that inn——?”

“Yes. The Hinatsuru.”

I knew that Ai’s father married into their family, but ..... So, that’s how they met.

“The Hinatsuru’s kitchens were a disaster at the time. The former manager got a little too enthusiastic when a new major highway was completed and booked way too many guests, which put extreme pressure on the kitchen staff. Seriously, it was like a medical tent in the middle of a war zone in there ..... I went in thinking I’d be the extra young guy helping out but wound up working as the head chef.”

“But you worked really hard, didn’t you Daddy? Mom always said the inn would’ve gone broke a long time ago if you never came! And *if you’re going to get married, choose someone young with enough skill to know what they’re doing!*”

Ai’s eyes sparkle as she looks my way for some reason.

Her father gives me a shameful grimace and says, “While my daughter may be exaggerating, it’s true that I worked as if my life depended on it. I didn’t return to the employee housing facility once during my first three months, sleeping in the storage room next to the vegetables instead.”

“Sounds like a rough place to work .....

“Working at an inn is a constant fight against the clock. That being said, the human body does have its limits. Right at the beginning of my fourth month there, during a blizzard no less, I collapsed in the kitchen still holding a knife in my hand.”

Winters on the North Coast are brutal. Being from the middle of nowhere in Fukui Prefecture, I should know.

He couldn’t go to the hospital because of the snow, which of course also kept the doctors from coming to him. How did Mr. Hinatsuru get out of those dire straits .....? My palms are sweating just listening to him, and I’m not the only one on the edge of my seat.

Ai must be hearing this story for the first time, too, because she leans over the counter and yells “Daddy! Were you okay?!”

“Rather than taking me back to staff housing, I was carried from the kitchen all the way to the Hinatsuru family house. I suppose they were worried about something happening to someone else’s employee under their watch, but they took great care of me until the streets were clear enough to call a doctor. That’s when——.”

“When?”

He takes a glance at Ai before saying with a mix of so many emotions.

“When this one’s mother ..... snatched me up .....”

He said *snatched*!

Just now, he said *snatched*, right?!

Whether his daughter understood the meaning behind her father’s choice of words or not, she seemed to be innocently enjoying the story.

“Oh, wow! You and mom getting married was destiny!”

“..... Hahaha ..... You’re the spitting image of your mother, Ai .....”

“Do you really think so?”

No doubt.

“Let me get this straight. You ended up marrying the person who took care of you after you collapsed?”

“In the end, yes ..... But you have to remember that she was the heir to a well-established and highly successful inn, and I was just a chef. Not only were we from completely different worlds, our ages were fairly far apart. Not to mention, I was technically still in training. Akina ..... Ai’s mother approached me first, saying *I want you to marry me and stay here at the Hinatsuru*, but I turned her down on the spot, finished my contract and came back to Osaka——.”

Of course, he would. No matter how beautiful or rich the girl is, anyone would be scared before any joy set in if she opened with a marriage proposal. And doesn’t the patient normally fall for the caregiver in that situation? Very scary.

“But, that’s not where the story ends, is it?”

“That it is not. You see ..... She followed me all the way here.”

“Here?! A-as in ..... Hozenji Yokochō *here*?! Ai’s mother?!”

“She dropped out of high school, renounced all ties to her family and insisted on working together with me.”

T-that super manager who's devoted her life to that inn ..... ran away from home?!

"Then?! What then?! What happened next?!"

"I couldn't just kick her out on the streets, so she ended up living with me at my apartment ....."

"How old was Mrs. Hinatsuru back then?"

"17."

S-s, 17?! That means ..... he was living with a high school girl in the middle of Osaka?!

"Isn't that against the law?!"

"Please don't take this the wrong way, Kuzuryu-sensei, it's far more acceptable than your current situation."

"That's right, loli-con. Die and repent in the afterlife, loli-con."

I'm taking fire from both Mr. Hinatsuru and Big Sis. Kill me now.

Suddenly, Ai yells at the top of her lungs.

"Master does not have a Lolita complex! Also, that was a wonderful story about two people brought together by the Splashing Fudo! You think so too, right Daddy? That's why you married Mom, isn't it?!"

"W-well, that may be true ..... But, thinking about it rationally, the lengths she went to back then certainly weren't normal——."

"I'm telling Mom!"

"And there isn't a better love story in the world, yep."

Mr. Hinatsuru .....

Seeing another man totally whipped by his wife *and* daughter is making me embarrassed for him. He needs to stand up for himself more.

Me? I firmly believe the husband needs to wear the pants.

“Well, I have to admit that if the younger girl threw her life away all to be with me, I couldn’t say no. Any man would feel it right in their heart. Like, if Charlette gave up her French citizenship to be with me, I’d probably marry her right then and thereeeee—ow! That hurts! Big Sis, that’s my fooota-ta-ta-oowwww!!”

“If it’s not one it’s another ..... Men are all loli-cons ..... All of them can just die .....,”

mutters Big Sis as she grinds my foot into the floor.

Even Ai’s upset, saying, “Why’s Charlette your example and not me?!”

“Isn’t Master awfully late?”

“Oww ..... Y-Yes, he is. It shouldn’t take this long .....”

We’ve been here for quite a while now.

Mr. Hinatsuru sent someone back upstairs to check on him, but—.

“..... It seems that Kiyotaki-*sensei* showed himself out the back door.”

“He what?!”

Well, I kind of expected this.

He probably thought seeing us would be too awkward. That’s how it always is after losing a match. I can relate so much, painfully so, that I don’t blame him for sneaking out.

And ..... Honestly, I’m relieved.

Seeing my Master get checkmated last night was about as shocking as witnessing my father having an *accident*. I still need time to come to grips with him losing his skills with age.

That’s why I don’t want to see him just yet. Surely, Big Sis feels the same way.

“Kiyotaki-*sensei* left behind enough money to cover lunch and a taxi for all of you. I’ve got to pull out all the stops as a thank you for taking care of my daughter as well.”

Mr. Hinatsuru proceeded to whip up lunch for us. It was delicious, but Ai refusing to make me dinner when we got home was rough.

## TWO PATHS

“It’s nice to have you home. I was worried about you.”

“..... Sorry ‘bout that.”

Not three steps in the door and Keika pokes her head out of the kitchen.

“You should be apologizing to Yaichi and Ginko, not me. They went out looking for you, so they deserve a *thank you*. Oh, and Ai covered for you in the classroom. Make sure she gets paid, okay?”

“..... Water.”

“Already on the table.”

Keika disappears back into the kitchen. Holdin’ my head to keep the room from dancin’, I stagger in after her.

She ain’t keepin’ her distance ‘cause she’s angry. Just the opposite, it’s ‘cause she was worryin’ about me.

Bein’ nice to a competitor comin’ home after a defeat only rubs salt on the wounds.

There it is, a big pitcher of ice water sittin’ on the table. She must’ve gotten it ready when she heard me come in. That’s just like her, knowin’ I’d want ice water when I got home.

My body’s cravin’ it ..... But I still pause before takin’ a gulp.

—Drinkin’ this’ll bring back all yesterday’s memories once the buzz wears off  
.....

Gettin’ offed by a mistake I can’t believe I made, the demotion warnin’ light flashin’ red, fightin’ with my apprentice ..... They’ll all catch up to me at once.

“..... It didn’t used to be like this in the Shogi world .....”



I plop down in a kitchen chair and groan between gulps of the buzz-killin' water.

"What's this? So, it was better in the *good ol' days*?"

"Nah. It was horrible."

"Huh?"

"Nobody knew the meanin' of *manners*. All the vets would be yakkin' about investin' or the horse races at the top of their lungs from the crack of dawn. They'd change the rules about the Sub League or how matches were set up all the time just to make things easier for 'em. Try sayin' somethin' and they'd shoot ya down: *Rank up or shut up!*"

Kansai bein' so much weaker than Kanto only made it worse.

They treated us like a bunch of thugs ..... Well, *playin' Shogi* was pretty much the same as *gamblin'* back then.

"Compared to those days, the Shogi world is heaven now. Chairman Tsukimitsu treats everyone fair and square. All the newbies know how to act. No one gets chatty durin' matches. It's set up perfectly to focus on Shogi."

"Then, isn't that good?"

"For me, right now, it's hell. So much worse than back in the day."

"Pardon? It's heaven but it's also hell?"

"Now that I'm the same age as those vets were ..... watchin' newbies pass 'em up one by one like they did, I understand how they felt. So much so, it hurts."

"..... How do you mean?"

"The anxiety."

I open the floodgates and let everythin' I've been feelin' come pourin' out.

"Anxious that even stronger newbies are gonna show up, that kiddos will pass

'em by, that time is catchin' up to 'em ..... The anxiety never stops. The only way to deal with it was talkin' with other players their age durin' matches. Otherwise, the anxiousness got so bad they couldn't take it .....

They'd bark at everyone and anyone just to seem that much bigger. Couldn't win at Shogi no more, so they went to the only weapon they had left, seniority, and swung it around harder than they needed to.

Now, I get it. I get their anxiousness, their fear.

"..... But, doin' that all day won't help against the strong youngens. They'll pass ya sooner or later."

What happened to the vets who held out to the bitter end back then?

They got pushed out of the Shogi world's spotlight bit by bit ..... Until their retirement got announced in a little article on the association's home page ..... And they fell off the map completely.

Then, lastly, their obituary showed up in the back corner of some Shogi magazine.

People forgot who they were and the last proof they existed showed up somewhere no one would bother lookin'.

"Shogi ain't all that fun when ya ain't winnin'. If it ain't fun, ya don't want to do research and ya can't get psyched up for matches ....."

"....."

"But the competitor in ya never dies, so most go for gamblin' or playin' the stock market ..... I went for gamin' on my phone."

I pull out my phone and admit the truth.

That rush that Shogi doesn't give me anymore, now I'm tryin' to get it from this screen any spare moment I got. I used to go to pachinko parlors, but nothin' beats casually pullin' out my phone and feelin' that rush anywhere I want. Could be addicted, I don't know.

With this much fun at yar fingertips, who would ever bother playin' Shogi when ya can't win?

These fingertips that have been used only for Shogi for decades ..... Fingers that suffered through trainin' intense enough to break fingernails and bleed now serve a high-rankin' player that uses 'em for a quick fix.

All I got for workin' my way up to 9-*dan* ..... is constant fear and smartphone games to distract me from it.

Thinkin' about it logically, it's all too pitiful.

Even feels like sacrilege against Shogi itself.

"..... Players feelin' their skills slip away can choose one of two paths ....."

"Two?"

"The first, do nothin'."

"Do ..... Nothing at all?"

"Yep. Not a thing."

Rather than workin' with others or joinin' practice sessions, just cloak yarself in mystery.

"Ya can hide that ya're losin' a step if ya don't do anythin' about it. It makes yar opponent extra cautious, and they judge ya on what ya used to be ..... They'll see through ya eventually, sure, but until then."

Keika didn't ask what happened once the jig was up. 'Cause she didn't have to.

"..... And, the other path?"

"Bow yar head to the youngens and ask for help."

Easier sayin' it than doin' it.

"There are worse things than learnin' from one of the risin' stars. But, there

ain't that many of 'em, and they won't see any point in workin' with an old guy like me. I'd get turned down right away."

"..... You're probably right."

"The only option I've got is to lower my head to Sub League members young enough to be my own kids or grandkids and ask for practice matches. They're the only ones that'll consider workin' with me. Once rumors get out that I can't even beat 'em, word'll spread overnight. Playin' 'em in secret won't make a lick 'a difference. Once that happens, my *trust* as a pro is as good as gone, I become the butt of everyone's jokes ..... Pretty much get tormented to death. I'd have a better chance prolongin' my career by doin' nothin'."

"....."

Looks like Keika is lost for words.

Players back in the old days chose to retire before havin' to make a choice.

It was normal for former Meijin and Meijin Challengers, and players who spent a decent amount of time in the A rank to retire the day they got knocked out of it.

They knew the torment was comin' and took their own lives before it started.

Except, I still felt *up to fightin'* when I dropped to B-1, and that didn't change until very recently ..... Now? Of course, I don't.

After a while, Keika started talkin' like she'd been broodin' over it a while.

"But ..... Things can't stay as they are, right? In that case, wouldn't it be better to find someone, anyone, in the Sub League and ask for help? Aren't we Kansai Shogi players known for our stubborn grit?"

"That we are. I think that's the right path."

"Well, then——."

"I can't."

I've asked myself the same thing many, probably hundreds of times.

"I ..... I just can't do that. I can't ....."

"..... Father ....."

"As a Meijin Challenger, that's the one thing I ....."

The only thing I have left now is my former A rankin'. That, and the pride that comes with challengin' the Meijin twice.

If I lose 'em ..... then what've I got left to show for my life?

The 76th Season Placement Matches  
C-2 Division 9th Match (Kansai)

## KUZURYU, SHOCKING INGENUITY

(Photography – Article) Mato



A mere two rounds remain in C-2's placement matches this season. As the ninth round begins, players still in contention for promotion are as follows. (Numbers indicate placement)

(5) Ichiro Jyougao 7-*dan* 8 W – 0 L

(18) Shingo Hacchou 4-*dan* 8 W – 0 L

(36) Yaichi Kuzuryu *Ryuo* 8 W – 0 L

(38) Satoru Hatomachi 5-*dan* 8 W – 0 L

(3) Kenta Iuchi 6-*dan* 7 W – 1 L

(49) Mirai Futatsuzuka 4-*dan* 7 W – 1 L

(9) Maki Yuzuriya 4-*dan* 6 W – 2 L

As you can see, four remain undefeated in this extremely competitive battle. All will be promoted should they maintain their flawless records, but only the top three will reach B-2 should any of them stumble.

While an intense battle rages at the top, the fight to avoid demotion points in the bottom ten slots is just as fierce.

As fate would have it, players clashing on both ends of the spectrum assembled today at the Kansai Shogi Association's Onjyoudan no Ma to decide their fate side-by-side.

Decorated veteran and face of Kansai Shogi for decades, Tatsuo Zaou already has two demotion points to his name. His struggles to obtain victory stars have continued and a loss today would bring retirement that much closer to reality.

His opponent is one of Kanto's brightest rising stars and candidate for promotion this season, Satoru Hatomachi 5-*dan*. Hatomachi is a skilled player who currently has momentum on his side.

Zaou has made no attempt to hide how painful it is for him to maintain proper posture in recent years and today was no different, grimacing several times during the match.

The Shogi evolved into an aerial battle, Zaou's specialty.

Their match proceeded at an unusually high pace with both formations being well defined before the afternoon lunch break. Zaou sat for several minutes once the players returned before signaling his intent to surrender.

When I inquired as to why the match ended so quickly during the review session, Hatomachi hesitantly offered this explanation.

"..... I've studied that sequence before, so ....."

"At right? So, 'at's a standard now."

The match finished at 2:19 p.m.

"I played predictably, didn't have no pizzazz," said Zaou once the review session concluded. With this victory, Hatomachi increases his winning streak to nine matches and is within reach of promotion.

Yaichi Kuzuryu-ryuo's match took place the next board over, and it also advanced at an unusually high speed.

Kuzuryu's low placement leaves no room for error. One loss would all but end his chances to promote.

Although under immense pressure as the sole titleholder in C-2, his 11 consecutive victories in league matches show no sign of it.

He has garnered a great deal of attention as of late, introducing new twists like the ♖6 Five Knight and Single Knight Jump to his strategy of choice: the Bishop Exchange.

With Kuzuryu on offense, today's match also became a Bishop Exchange.

His opponent was Kanto's stalwart veteran, Keiji Souza 7-dan.



34 years' experience as a member of C-2, he has the unusual distinction of *never once receiving a demotion point during his professional career.*

Grufter Shogi fans have dubbed him the *Ultimate Bouncer* for his unusually strong showings against young and rising players. When asked about his nickname, Souza had this to say: "It's an honor."

He took it in stride with a positive outlook.

"Talented young players promote before you know it, so I may never have another chance to play against them. That's why I make sure not to waste the chances I get."

Souza even took a victory from the current Meijin when he belonged to C-2. The *Ultimate Bouncer* nickname truly isn't just for show.

"I won't have many opportunities to play against the youngest Ryuo in history. I'm even more excited to play against him than I was back when I fought the Meijin," stated Souza just before the match got underway. This is their first encounter.

Kuzuryu advanced his Knight unusually early, on the 17th move.

Upon seeing Single Knight Jump, the fuel behind Kuzuryu's recent surge, on the board, Souza spent a great deal of time considering his options before he decided to buffer his defenses and hold off the attack rather than meet it head on.

However, Kuzuryu denied him the opportunity.

19th move. Kuzuryu sacrificed a Pawn to force combat.

Gasps of surprise erupted throughout the Player's Room once that move came to pass.

"No way?! With a Sitting King?"

"Think he'll be okay like this?"

“Forgot to set a wall, did he?”

Initiating battle with the King still in starting position is so shockingly ingenious that even the young professionals and Sub League members analyzing the match couldn't hide their disbelief. Standards dictate one move be spent setting up the King's defense, so omitting it altogether is quite a leap of faith.

Though Souza wasn't expecting it, he concluded that the formation was in his favor.

“Come!” he said with vigor as he took Kuzuryu's Pawn.

His King well-defended, Souza reasoned that he could outlast a frontal assault should worse come to worse ..... It was a decision he would come to regret.

“Not only was the Offense King sitting, the Golds were still in place. On top of that, a Silver Wall. That's a picture-perfect example of a bad formation. My own Master would have disowned me if I played that way during my training days.”

Indeed, no one would have believed the Ryuo, the man on top of the Shogi world, was the one behind the board if his name had not been revealed to the audience. His formation ignored Shogi theory to the point most would believe an amateur was using it.

“However, the deeper I read ..... I realized I couldn't break it.”

Sota Kunugi 3-*dan*, working as match recorder, had this to say after the match.

“There's a saying that goes *Avoid the Sitting King*, but the King's defenses should be looked at relatively. Thinking *the stronger the better* is outdated.”

It seems that to the first elementary school aged 3-*dan* ever, *defense* doesn't have the absolute value that modern Shogi theory states.

Kuzuryu pushed forward with the attack as if to prove this new way of thinking holds water and stripped the Defending King of its defenses in the blink

of an eye. As opposed to Souza's once-protected King now naked on the board, Kuzuryu's starting formation was mostly intact.

The rush was on.

The 59th move. Kuzuryu was quick to advance his Rook across the board.

It landed like a straightforward knockout punch in a boxing match, Kuzuryu's right fist connecting with Souza's soft chin. His surrender was just a matter of time.

The players combined for 67 moves.

Of Souza's six hours of waiting time, he used a mere one hour and seventeen minutes. The *Ultimate Bouncer* was overwhelmed before he could figure out where to use it.

Many in the Player's Room who chided Kuzuryu's strategy were now staring blankly at the monitor in disbelief at the results.

"He's too strong," was all Hatomachi could say upon returning to the Player's Room following his own match. He left the association and boarded the train back to Kanto without taking a seat.

There was no trace of joy or relief in his eyes upon his exit.

"Oh. Hey there, Keiji."

Kousuke Kiyotaki stopped by the association and happened to spot Keiji Souza with a cigarette in the second-floor smoking room, a corner of the floor walled off with glass, and walked over to say hello.

"Kousuke ....."

"Talkin' to your opponent's Master in the middle of a match got ya feelin' uneasy? I'm not tryin' to figure out yar next move for him or anythin'."

Kousuke and Keiji.

Though the two belonged to Kansai and Kanto respectively, they maintained a close relationship after becoming professionals in the same year. Whenever one was in town for a match, the other would invite him out for drinks or to play a few rounds of mahjong.

In fact, Kousuke had come to the association today for that very reason. However, Souza's next words were the last thing he expected to hear.

"No. The match is already over."

"It what?! It's only four in the afternoon!"

Kousuke was on the verge of taking a dig at his old buddy, "*Get checkmated in one like me?*" However, the look on Keiji's face stopped him cold.

Only then did he notice.

The cigarette was lit, but Keiji had never once put it up to his lips.

It was pinned between his fingers with the trail of wispy white smoke rising from the tip like an incense stick—.

"..... The thing is, I've always been confident that I would survive. That was true when the current Meijin's generation arrived on the scene, the one after that, and the next one, too. Don't get me wrong, I never thought I would rise to the top. But I never thought I was going to be killed off ..... It didn't matter what bizarre strategy or new technique my opponents threw at me, I could figure them out. As they say, *Shogi is a conversation*, and I was a full participant."

Kousuke found this strange.

Keiji hardly ever said a word following a match.

"But today, Kousuke. My opponent today ..... It's hard for me to say it because he's your apprentice and all, but ....."

A hint of fear made his voice tremble as he trailed off.

“He’s not a human being like us. That’s an alien or a robot, I tell you.”

“.....!!”

Kousuke was taken aback.

Keiji Souza was no dominant force. He was certainly no carnivore at the top of the food chain on the savannah that was the Shogi world.

However, the Keiji he knew was strong enough to contend with those ravenous beasts. That strength came from an ironclad will to *survive*.

And now, that unyielding spirit had been completely shattered.

“But, then again ..... It might be better that it was your apprentice in the end, Kousuke. Had he been anyone else’s, I’d probably want to go right up to them and give them a piece of my mind: *How could you have done something so stupid!* ..... Raising the monster that will devour us all.”

The cigarette had become little more than a stick of ash by the time Keiji extinguished it in the ashtray.

“..... Keiji, ya wouldn’t be——.”

“Kousuke.”

“Hm?”

“It was a great run. Thanks for being part of it.”

When that year’s placement matches came to a close ...

Keiji Souza received his first ever demotion point and immediately announced his decision to become a *Free Class* Shogi player.

## FAMILY SESSION

“Sorry ‘bout the other day.”

The day after my placement match.

Master sent everyone a message out of the blue that said, “I’ve got news,” and all of us gathered at his place. Even his granddaughter apprentices are here.

We’d been going out of our way to avoid each other for a while, so him sending out that message has everyone on edge.

Was today going to be the day he says the placement matches got to be too much for him and he’s going to talk about *retirement* .....?

Except, as he looks at all of us in turn, Master goes in a completely different direction.

“Countin’ Women’s League members, our family tree has six. That’s exactly even.”

An even number.

Big Sis and I lock eyes the moment he said it.

“I was thinkin’ we’d start doin’ regular practice sessions as a family. What’cha think?”

—Just as I thought, he is proposing *family sessions* .....

Tightknit, relatively large Shogi families sometimes gather together like this and try to *level up* the whole family tree at once.

The problem with ours is ..... We may all be part of the Kiyotaki tree, but our playing styles and rankings are all over the place. Some of us will get more out of a family practice session than others.

Players only agree to do practice sessions at all because there’s merit for both

parties, but family sessions only happen because they're *family*. The whole thing falls apart depending on how each member reacts to the idea—.

“Can we, please! I want to practice with everyone!!” says Ai Hinatsuru, sitting on her ankles at the end of the table. Getting up on her knees and all for it, she reaches for Ai Yashajin sitting next to her, grabs her arm and says, “You want to, too, right, Ten-chan?! Right?!”

“..... I .....”

I can tell that she's being as respectful to Master Kiyotaki as possible, but her eyes keep jumping to where Big Sis is sitting in the corner.

“So long as there is a possibility we may meet in the Mynavi Open, I would like to avoid participating in the same practice sessions.”

“Indeed ..... A most valid opinion.”

Akira must've been listening in on our conversation from the hallway because no sooner did her voice come through the door than she slides it open with a *bang!*

“My Lady! Please allow me to participate in your stead!!”

“Huh? That would never be allowed. Know your place, Akira.”

“B-But I only wish to improve! May I observe at the very least .....? I'll record the matches, keep time, whatever you need, just please let me take *paaaart!!!*”

Akira takes hold of Ai's hands, pleading her case.

Unfortunately for her, Ai yells, “Get your hands off me!” and kicks with her feet.

Master apologetically adds, “Sorry, but this one's only for pros,” and turns her away.

Keika, who has been quiet this whole time, cautiously turns to face me and says, “Um ..... This would be great for us, but ..... Are you okay with it, Yaichi? I

know you're undefeated right now, but your most important placement match ever is right around the corner. We could wait until everything is said and done to start .....?"

"That's when Ginko'll be startin' in the 3-*dan* Division. Now's the time to get goin'."

"B-But, Father——."

"Ya gotta call me *Master* at times like this. When will ya learn?" Master scolds her. "There's a new software strategy makin' waves in pro league matches these days called Sittin' Bishop Left Mino. If we don't get everybody up to speed sooner rather than later somebody's gonna get tripped up when they least expect it. That's why I'm suggestin' we do family sessions. There's plenty of merit for Yaichi and Ginko."

With that, Master looks at me and cocks a confident eyebrow.

"Well? Ya had no idea I was such a researcher, did ya?"

"No. I'm impressed."

I nod as deep as I can to make it look like I agree wholeheartedly.

"I've been thinking about doing more practice sessions lately. I even talked to Big Sis, saying if we're going to do it anyway, why not as a family? Isn't that right, Big Sis?"

"True. I'll be going against many of Kanto's devoted researchers in the 3-*dan* division, so this will help my confidence."

"That it will. Ha ha ha!"

In the best mood I've seen him in in a long time, Master laughs and takes out his pocket calendar to set a date.



# THE MAESTRO

“Heh ..... Family sessions, eh? Sounds like Mr. Kiyotaki can’t just admit it.”

Hearing what Big Sis and I had to say when we came by the Gokigen bathhouse for a practice session, King Mitsuru Oishi flashes a skeptical grin.

“It’s because he used to be a lone wolf like me. But, yeah, his generation was a lot more hard-nosed when it came to doing practice sessions and I bet he can’t exactly bow down to his apprentice and say, *teach me* after all this time, either.”

“The whole family practicing together ..... How wonderful .....

The voice came from Mr. Oishi’s daughter, Asuka.

She’s not exactly a member of this practice group, but she’s always close by and quietly listening to whatever we’re talking about.

She’s unassuming but passionate, a great cook, and her massive boobs are ..... cute, so I’m happy having her around. Big Sis doesn’t seem to like her much, though.

Drinking some of the hot milk Asuka prepared for us, I ask, “Mr. Oishi, you’re Ootsuchi 9-*dan*’s apprentice, right? Do you ever do family sessions?”

“My Master’s too busy snoozing all day for that. The guy doesn’t even show up at association events, so practice sessions or taking on new apprentices certainly isn’t going to happen.”

“Isn’t Ootsuchi-*sensei* Zaou-*sensei*’s .....?”

“His younger brother apprentice, yes.”

Hearing that, it’s a full-blown miracle that Zaou-*sensei* is still playing in the pros right now.

Daijiro *The Hammer* Ootsuchi used to be one of the stars of the Ranging Rook party.

He got that nickname by using his worldly senses to slam Rooks and Bishops into his opponent's defenses like hammer blows. A popular player in Kansai, he never claimed a title but spent many years competing in the A rank.

Although he retired pretty much the day he dropped out of A, he devoted his time to training the next generation ..... But Mr. Oishi is the only one of his apprentices who turned pro.

Since Mr. Oishi hasn't taken any apprentices of his own, the Ootsuchi family tree is just the two of them.

"Then, you'll have to work hard to revive the family tree with Asuka."

"Y-you're right .....! I'll do my best .....!"

Asuka clenches her fists together with a determined look in her eyes.

But Mr. Oishi shoots her down on the spot.

"Oi, Asuka. I don't remember taking you as my apprentice."

"....."

Asuka puffs up her reddening cheeks with a defiant "Ngh!" which is pretty unusual for her and says, "..... Okay, I'll ..... I'll take Yaichi as my Master .....!"

"Say what?! M-me?!"

Me, thrown for a loop by a new prospective apprentice. Mr. Oishi, fuming.

"I won't allow it! You hear me, Asuka?! I will never, ever allow you to apprentice to this teenage brat so high on hormones he'll put the moves on any girl he sees, no matter how young! What if you get a bun in the oven at your age?! What then, huh?!"

"Hold up?! How would becoming my apprentice get her pregnant?!"

Offended by the accusation, I angrily state my case to the Maestro.

“I’ll have you know both my apprentices have joined the Women’s League and neither of them are pregnant!!”

“Of course not! Because you only go after the ones who are too young to get knocked up!!”

“You’ve got it all wrong! You think the rumors are true, don’t you?! Well, they’re not!! Come on, Big Sis, say something, would you?!”

“Stay away if you don’t want to get pregnant. Even I’ve gotten dragged to a shady hotel after one of these practice sessions before.”

“Why the f’in hell would you bring that up now?! Besides, you’re the one that——.”

*Pow!*

Big Sis’s knuckles connect with my jaw, an epic right cross.

“Watch your language, *younger brother apprentice*.”

“S-Sorry ..... Please forgive me with a cherry on top .....”

It hurts so bad I’m pleading in ways I don’t even understand. I’m bleeding, aren’t I?

“Take a good look, Asuka. No matter how good at Shogi he is, becoming this pathetically horny excuse for a boy’s apprentice is as good as taking a knife to your future. Have some self-respect, for goodness sake!”

“D ..... Daddy, you ..... knucklehead .....!!” Asuka screams at him before running out of the classroom.

I guess being called a *knucklehead* by his daughter must have hurt because Mr. Oishi rubs his temple and lets out a long, painful sigh.

“Haaaa ..... Having girls that age is a never-ending headache.”

“I get that impression .....”

I scowl, gingerly running my fingers across the throbbing red spot on my

cheek. Mine's more physical, but ouch!

Big Sis glares at me but ignores what I said and turns to talk to Mr. Oishi.

"More importantly, *Sensei*. Shall we analyze the King Title Match?"

"Speaking of headaches." His frown grows deeper as he says, "I lost matches one and two already. Goki Central, my ace strategy being under lockdown right now sure isn't helping ..... Have you noticed how far my rating plunged this month?"

Simply put, *rating is strength*. The higher the number, the stronger.

There are many ways to calculate it, but the Win-Loss record is used for the pros.

As of right now, the Meijin has the best rating at 2,014.

Crown Yo Okito is next with 1,925. Ayumu comes after him at 1,899. I'm a little lower than that with 1,881. My rating has jumped up quite a bit thanks to my 12-match winning streak.

Mr. Oishi's rating has taken a dive because of his recent losses: down to 1,801.

That's over a hundred points below the Crown. He has, maybe, a 32 percent chance of winning.

"Top players have a hard time improving their rating because they always get matched up against other top players. You can't judge based on those numbers alone," I say to Mr. Oishi to try and cheer him up. He almost never beats himself up like this, too.

Ayumu's rating is only that high because he keeps winning against players that are comparatively weaker than him. He's raking in the victory stars right now because he's still in B-2, but there's no telling what'll happen once he promotes to A. Then again, the same could be said for me ... but still.

Considering that's how Ayumu got there, it's truly amazing that the Meijin

and Mr. Okito can keep their rating so high despite always playing against the best of the best.

But I beat that Meijin four times in a row, so rating is just a relative number.

If the rating is double, then it's a different story, though.

"Just out of curiosity, what's software rating these days?"

"While I don't know the exact number ....."

I hesitate, I'm not sure if I should tell him or not.

"..... The latest programs are estimated to be between 3,000 and 4,000."

"So that's how it is. People can't compete with it anymore."

The Worldly Maestro gives a dry laugh before saying, "Suppose I'll see what Software-*sensei* can teach me. Clean up my weak spots."

## PRACTICE SESSION IN SAKURANOMIYA

“Just what is Master trying to do?”

I hear Big Sis’s voice come out of the bathroom as I sprawl out on the bed.

We’re in a room at a certain hotel in Sakuranomiya.

Coming here after a practice session with Mr. Oishi has become our *routine*.

“Hey, Yaichi. Are you listening?”

“Hm?”

She sounds irritated that I didn’t answer her.

“Bragging about the *outdated* Sitting Bishop Left Mino like that ..... It hurt just listening to him. Master used to be so strong, and now .....

“..... Now we know how Amuro felt .....

“What’s that?”

“Don’t you know? Amuro’s father was a brilliant engineer who built the first Gundam, but he got sick with oxygen poisoning in outer space. By the time he’d recovered and reunited with Amuro, he insisted on equipping the Gundam with outdated weaponry.”

“Never heard of it. What’s Gundam? A new variant of the *ginga* snow roof?”

She doesn’t know Gundam .....?

There’s seriously nothing else in her head besides Shogi, is there? At this level, I’m seriously concerned about how she can communicate with her friends at school.

“It’s the family sessions we should be talking about. Yaichi, are you going to go along with it?”

“If that’s what it takes to make Master happy, yes. I’ve been looking for a place for my own apprentices to practice anyway.”

“..... Hph.”

Her tone just dropped like a rock.

She must be as worried about Master as I am.

“I got to see Master’s schedule when he took out his calendar to set the date, but ..... He doesn’t have any other practice sessions lined up whatsoever. He’ll be cut off from the latest research at this rate. If we don’t give him bare minimum info, no one else will.”

“But you know what he’s like. No matter what we teach him, he’ll be too stubborn to use it.”

“Well .....

Master has too much pride to consider asking his apprentices for help to begin with. I’d bet he’d play a completely different strategy to avoid doing exactly what either of us tell him to do.

What’s worse, if he ever found out those strategies came from software .....

“..... It’s also true that we can’t just let him be the way he is now.”

“For sure.”

It’s true that Sitting Bishop Left Mino did show up in *league matches* only recently.

However —people have been researching it *behind the scenes for over a year*.

It’s fairly simple to learn how to use it with software, so everyone’s figured out how to prevent it in the first place.

*... Which is why it never showed up in league matches for over a year.*

But higher ranking players who don’t use software and don’t interact with

younger players didn't know about it.

They're defenseless against software's *instant death magic* ..... And get destroyed.

That's what's happening between the veteran and younger players right now.

An uprising where lowly C-2s are sniping the big names in A and B-1 left and right ..... That's the reason why the torch is being passed to the next generation so quickly.

"Once someone knows their opponent doesn't use software, they can cast all the instant death magic they want. Fighting in the pros without using software right now is like walking naked through a minefield."

"....."

Big Sis doesn't say anything.

Fear of *instant death magic* isn't just for the pros. Far more intense research arms races are going on in the Sub League. No matter what strategy they use, they only get proven *right* if they win their way through the 3-*dan* division.

"..... Think he'll be okay? Oishi-sensei, too ....."

"We gave him the bare minimum he'll need to put up a fight, but ..... Honestly, it's a long shot. I never thought Mr. Okito was researching Ranging Rook as well."

Crown Yo Okito is a master at researching with software. He was probably the first player to get good at it, too.

That gave him a huge advantage, even more than I thought it would. His tremendous stock of knowledge had to be a big part of getting through the King League, which is so competitive that people call it the Infernal King League. Now, he's the challenger for the title.

"I want Mr. Oishi to last as long as he can so I can get an idea how deep Mr. Okito's research goes. There's a good chance he'll show up in the Ryuo League



next season.”

Defend one title and the battle for the next has already begun, that’s title matches in a nutshell. I can’t let my guard down for a single second.

“Do you think you’ll beat Okito-*sensei* in a big match, Yaichi?”

“That depends on how efficient my research is.”

I close my eyes and mentally run through some simulations as I answer.

“I can leave the strategy research to software if worse comes to worst and just study the results. That wasn't an option before because everything would fall apart before I could pull it off in a live match. But, after the breakthrough I had against the Meijin——.”

“Breakthrough? As in more reading ability? ..... Yaichi, didn’t you say you were feeling off? Like you couldn’t control it?”

“I used software for that, too.”

“Huh?”

“I had the software analyze my play during matches. Where I spent waiting time to read the board, when my brain was firing on all cylinders or losing concentration and making mistakes, things like that.”

“.....”

“It gives you all that information in numbers, so your precision during matches and research efficiency skyrockets. Human training partners will make mistakes, but machines never do. The best part is you can research with them anytime, anywhere you want.”

This discovery was a byproduct of the Ryuo Title Match.

From when I shut myself in my room and depended solely on software for research.

All I have to do after that is maintain my reading skills with all the Shogi

puzzles I can get my hands on. Since I can do that with Ai, everything I'll need is at home. Talk about a perfect setup.

"It may be efficient, but .....,," Big Sis says hesitantly, "..... going that far seems a bit much."

"If I don't do it, then someone else definitely will. For now, I've started the revolution and I think Shogi will keep changing just like this."

The *Modern Shogi* system established by the Meijin's generation wouldn't work without a great deal of cooperation between players having practice sessions and versus matches.

I'll need an even more efficient and private way to acquire knowledge if I'm going to surpass them.

That's my conclusion.

One or two new strategies won't be enough to overthrow veterans like the Meijin. I need a weapon that will counter their best strategies in the blink of an eye, like what all those anime characters would do back in the day.

A world revolutionized by technology.

It's time for the generation born into this technological age to use that advantage to overthrow the old generation. A full-fledged *changing of the guard*.

"..... Yaichi, um ....."

"Yeah?"

"Do you ..... want to be a computer?"

Big Sis asks like she's afraid to hear the answer, but I say exactly what's on my mind.

"I'm not that stupid. People aren't machines. There's no way a person could use software strategies perfectly every single time. It's just——."

“Just?”

“I just feel like my ability to calculate gives me an edge over all the other pros out there right now. At least, I think so.”

“!! ..... That means .....”

Big Sis is at a loss for words.

Because, I’m basically saying *I’m the best in the Shogi world right now.*

Am I being arrogant?

Except that I beat the Meijin, defended my title and I’ve been taking victory stars one after another. My methods are producing visible results, so that proves I’m not wrong.

The Bishop Exchange <white> 6 Five Knight and Single Knight Jump are just the tip of the iceberg.

Start a revolution strong enough to overtake Modern Shogi and rise through the placement matches.

Then, I’ll be the next Meijin——.

“Hey, Big Sis. Aren’t you finished yet?”

“..... I’m changed, but .....”

A ruffling sound comes from the other side of the door as Big Sis suddenly sounds shy.

“Then come on out, would you?”

“..... *Sigh* .....”

Big Sis and I started our own practice session after leaving one with Mr. Oishi.

This is Ginko’s Cosplay Practice Session.

Let me explain how we got here.

As people who live in a world of constant competition, players believe in

jinxes and the power of a routine. When things are going well, we make sure not to change anything.

Building a personal routine is considered a valuable skill in the pros.

Big Sis and I coming to this hotel after practice sessions started as an accident, but I've been dominating my opponents since then and Big Sis became the first female member of the 3-*dan* division, too.

I want to keep riding this momentum through to promotion in the placement matches and Big Sis wants to join the 3-*dan* division with a full head of steam.

Both of us understand the benefits, so even though the air got a bit tense during the *apprentice Asuka incident*, neither of us thought about skipping this tonight.

Just to be clear, we haven't crossed *that* line. After all, we're here to play Shogi.

Which brings me to the cosplay part.

There was a sign inside the hotel entrance advertising a special deal: all customers get to wear any of the costumes for free. It's their new marketing strategy.

The thing is that Osakans are weak around the word *free*. So, I did what anyone would do and suggested we try it out, to which Big Sis threatened to *mount my head on a pike*.

But I didn't back down.

"Let's let Shogi decide," was my proposal.

I'll wear something if I lose. Take all the pics you want, post them online, I don't care.

Big Sis still wouldn't answer me, but once I started fanning myself and said, "Whew, this pressure's getting to me," she jumped right in. Shogi? I won, of course. Three in a row. Hit her with a full serving of my secret software

strategies!

And the finished product is——.



“Gin-kitty, dangerous beast.”

Whoa ..... Very dangerous .....!

“Is this ..... How it’s supposed to be .....? Shouldn’t there be more fabric .....?!!”

“That’s how it’s supposed to be,” declares the Dragon King Ryuo with authority.

Big Sis spends most of her time wearing her sailor-style school uniform, but she wears kimono for title matches and dresses for Shakando-*sensei*, too. She’s worn all sorts of clothes before.

But this is her first move into the cosplay scene.

Not to mention those glasses! I've seen her wear glasses about as much as I've seen her open a match by advancing an edge Pawn, almost never.

“More fabric? No! With you wearing it, Big Sis, pushing it to the absolute limit should work .....!!”

So, I start a revolution.

Started, but ..... There needs to be better balance, yeah?

This is cuteness overload.

“There needs to be less .....”

Can’t have too much of a good thing. Balance is key. That’s just as true for cosplay as it is for Shogi.

“If you do this here ..... Oh and take that off——.”





“Yeeeeeeeeessssssssssssssssssss!!”

Holy! Beyond adorable!!

And hot!! Ginko is h-h-h-hoooooottttttttttt!!

“Nghh! I’ll die ..... This is too embarrassing .....!!”

“No! This is great! Absolutely perfect!!”

Big Sis turns bright red, her whole body shaking as I show her what poses to make.

“More like this! More ..... yes! Now, curl your fingers like a cat!”

“L-Like this?”

“Mooooore!!”

“This?”

“Yeeees!! Thaaaaaaaat!! More, moooore!!”

“Like ..... meow?”

I guess all the compliments went to her head because Big Sis gets down on all fours on the bed and starts doing *tigress on the prowl* poses.

The Dual Women’s Title Holder is really getting into it.

“Wow, that’s cute! Amazing! Gin-kitty is the best!!”

“I-I’m cute? Are the pictures cute, too?”

“They sure are! You’re the cutest in the world, Big Sis! The cutest ever!!”

“Really .....≡ E-he-he ≡”

Well, that was easy.

As I thought. I’ve had an idea that Big Sis could be convinced to go with the flow for a while now. She usually keeps a wall up between her and the rest of the world but hit that wall hard enough and it’ll come crashing down.

—Will she do anything if you call her cute?

Now that I've learned the *cute* spell and know how to use it, it's time to use it. Gin-kitty mode is on full blast. Big Sis is meowing every chance she has and, damn, this is the real *instant death magic* right here! All that hot cuteness is going to make my heart explode!!

And so, after about an hour-long photo shoot ..... I mean practice session.

“Whew ..... How about a break .....?”

“Good me-ahh ..... idea.”

I'm out of MP, casting that spell so many times, and collapse onto the bed.

Calming down must have made Big Sis feel embarrassed because she wraps herself in a blanket before plopping down next to me.

“One other thing, about Master.”

“Yeah?”

“You don't think us giving the okay will give him any ideas about approaching young players and Sub League members in the Player's Room, do you?”

“! Well .....”

Players can be brutal creatures.

They'll hound you once they see you have something valuable.

If not, they'll ignore you like thin air.

Players will hang out together as friends, but practice sessions are a whole different story. You have to have something they want or be ranked the same or higher to even be considered.

So, even if Master went into the Player's Room and offered practice sessions with younger players, he'd be .....

“..... Sounds a lot like love,” Big Sis mumbles, but those words leave a sharp

pain in my chest.

## CARVING LIFE AWAY

Kousuke decided to make a rare visit to the association that day.

“Hiuma would be happy doin’ a practice session with me any day of the week.”

The oldest member of the Kansai Sub League, Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan*, was the only member of that group Kousuke had any connection to apart from his own apprentice, Ginko.

Nearly ten years ago now.

Back when the Sub League would take annual leisurely overnight trips as a group.

His apprentice Yaichi participated in one said trip and a veteran Sub League member approaching thirty years of age was about to wake the boy up to make him run to the convenience store for more snacks.

Hiuma stepped in to protect him.

As the story goes, Hiuma stood between them and said, “*Yaichi Kuzuryu is Kansai’s ... no, the Shogi world’s treasure! I will go buy anything you wish, just please don’t wake him!!*”

Hearing this story brought Hiuma Kagamizu to Kousuke’s attention.

For a country boy living off a miniscule salary all by himself, devoting his waking hours to Shogi training was by no means an easy feat.

Though he was careful not to dote on the young man and kept an appropriate distance, Kousuke found ways to assist him. Hiuma, perceptive as he was, understood that.

Therefore, Hiuma couldn't possibly turn him down——.

“Oh-ho! Everybody's workin' hard, I see,” said Kousuke at the top of his lungs the moment he entered the Player's Room and saw all the Sub League members playing practice matches.

The up-and-coming players didn't so much as pause. Hiuma was among them. Though he gave Kousuke a nod of acknowledgment, he shifted his focus back to his own practice match without saying a word.

—A 9-*dan* goes outta his way to say hello, and not a peep .....!

Anger swelled in his gut, but Kousuke held it down.

The Player's Room in his memory wasn't much different from a lounge.

The TV was always on, tuned in to a baseball game or horse racing, as a constant haze of cigarette smoke filled the air from dawn to dusk. Younger players trying to practice on their own would get an earful of veterans yelling, “Yer in the way! Get out!” That kind of place.

Of course, once they did get around to playing Shogi, the coffee tab was always on the line. Kousuke had lost a great deal of spending money at the hands of the older players.

—Scary ..... But there was a warmth to it.

And now, it felt like another place entirely.

The smoke-stained walls were covered with league match schedules and announcements from the association, the bookshelves that had been littered with manga and sports magazines were now filled with Shogi puzzles from one end to the other.

It goes without saying that the ash trays were a thing of the past and the TV monitor was hooked up to a live feed of a match taking place in the arena.

This unnaturally monochromatic transformation gave Kousuke the impression players these days had *gone soft*.

It was nothing more than a glorified classroom.

For Kousuke, adhering to the veteran's outrageous demands while grinning and bearing their random provocations was part of the training process.

It built character and prepared younger players for the stresses that came with living in the Shogi world and they were stronger for it.

—Looks like now I gotta be the one to teach 'em a thing or two.

Determined to fulfill his new role, Kousuke strode into the Player's Room with vigor as he looked on at each of the practice matches in turn.

"Ohh? That's an interestin' style ya got there."

Kousuke had found his way to the board where the boy who'd become youngest 3-*dan* the Shogi world had ever known just last month, Sota Kunugi, was playing.

Though he missed his first opportunity to promote when he lost to Ginko, the young player secured his entry to the 3-*dan* division the next time the Sub League met like nothing had ever happened.

Thinking it would be interesting to try his hand against the boy, Kousuke addressed him with a gentle tone.

"Kiddo, ya got a good grasp on strategy for bein' such a tyke. Tell me, what would ya do if someone played this move instead?"

"....."

Though he glanced up at Kousuke with a look that screamed *Who is this old guy?* Sota moved another piece in response.

"That's checkmated, too."

"Nah. Shift this out here, and the King is home free. Think hard, now."

With that, Kousuke interrupted the review session going on one board over.

The two players were only reviewing opening sequences, but he started badgering them with questions.

The issue was that Kousuke offered no opinions or research of his own and instead one-sidedly dug for answers out of as many of the players as he could.

From Kousuke's perspective, he was simply identifying people worthy of inviting to a practice session, but .....

"Now then, 'suppose it's 'bout time I got in on a match myself."

Despite not being involved in that particular match, Kousuke declared their review session to be at an end and immediately went over the one he thought looked like the weakest, lowest ranking Sub League member in the room and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Ya. Sorry, but would ya gimme that chair?"

Jumping in surprise that a top-tier pro would even address him directly, the Sub League member had no choice but to do as he was told. His shoulders slumping, the young man gave up his seat.

"Kiyotaki-sensei."

Hiuma had been in the middle of a review session one chair over but now spoke up for the first time.

His voice was terse, but Kousuke didn't notice.

"Alrighty. Which one of ya lucky kiddos'll be the first to play me, eh? I'll learn ya a thing or two. It ain't every day ya lot get the chance to learn from a Meijin Challenger, yeah?"

All the busy hands in the room came to a halt as the Sub League members exchanged uneasy glances back and forth.

However, not a single one of them moved to accept Kousuke's offer.

Overcoming the initial shock, he was about to extend another open invitation when suddenly.

"Sensei! May I have a word?"

“Hm? What’s eatin’ ya, Hiuma?”

“..... I’ll turn 30 years old during the next 3-*dan* division season. I’m already well beyond the age limit of 26 and this is the last season I can extend my tenure with a winning record. I only have so many matches remaining. Life as I know it will end in half a year.”

With those words, Hiuma gestured out to all the other Sub League members practicing in the room.

“I’m not the only one. Every person here is willing to work themselves to death for a chance to turn professional. All of us are desperate.”

“I know just how yar feelin’. My days back in the Sub League were no cakewalk either. Actually, ya guys are lucky! The association buildin’ wasn’t even half this size——.”

“No, you don’t understand,” said Hiuma, plain as day.

A new tension, one completely different from a match, took hold of the room.

Even so, Hiuma did not falter.

“I acknowledge that you are a high-ranking professional, *Sensei*. You have achieved 9-*dan* as well. I would follow your instructions in a heartbeat if we were in an arena. However, this room is dedicated to Shogi training and practice. Rather than people playing Shogi to kill time or for amusement, ones who seriously want to improve should take priority. It’s common sense.

“Furthermore, everyone is equal at a Shogi board. Those born into well-off houses may have grown up with more things at their disposal, but all who play Shogi have only 20 pieces to work with. Everyone battles on equal footing. People may listen to someone with a high status, but status has nothing to do with Shogi.

“That is Shogi. It treats everyone equally, including uneducated riffraff shunned by society like me. That’s why we try so hard. That’s why we devote



our hearts and souls to playing Shogi. We believe it's worth putting our very lives on the line for it. Shogi is what gives us purpose, recognizes our value as people.

“The young man you just forced out of that seat wakes up at 5 o'clock every morning and spends two hours on the train to get here. The reason he must get up so early is because every seat in here will be taken if he arrives after 7 o'clock. He may have a low *kyu* ranking and he may be the weakest player in this room. However, every one of us can see his determination, his drive to improve. We are happy to work with him because his persistence will have a positive impact on us as well.

“He worked hard to claim that seat. No one gave it up for him.

“Taking away a seat, asking about hard-earned research results and forcing someone to play against their will are not things anyone in this world can do. That holds true for the Meijin himself.”

Hiuma jerked his thumb toward his chest for emphasis.

“Let me ask you a question, *Sensei*. What we are doing here is completely different from a mundane board game with money on the table. We are carving our lives away to play Shogi. How are you going to compensate us for that, *Sensei*?”

“Compensate ..... ya?”

Rage built within Kousuke’s chest, his voice rising.

The whiskers of his beard shook with anger as beads of spit flung from his mouth.

“That’s what I’ve been tellin’ ya this whole time! I admit I don’t got the latest info, but I challenged the Meijin, twice! Here I am, offerin’ ta teach!”

“I’ll pass. Experience is something each person builds on their own time. There’s no point listening to someone else talk about the past.”

“Ya .....! I ..... a 9-*dan*, mind ya, I’m lowerin’ *my* head and askin’ *ya folks* to play a match——.”



“No, you did not, *Sensei*. You said, *I’ll learn ya a thing or two.*”

Calm and collected in the face of Kousuke’s fury, Hiuma Kagamizu Sub League 3-*dan*’s voice was crystal clear.

“As you are now, Kiyotaki-*sensei*, you have nothing to teach us. In fact, you are preventing us from training. Please, let us be.”

The chorus of snapping Shogi pieces and electronic clicks from chess clocks had completely vanished by this point.

No one said a word; every player’s eyes were fixed on the board in front of them ..... That is until Sota’s innocent remark, “Checkmated after all, don’t you think?” echoed through the room.



## AN EYE-OPENING NIGHT

“..... Jus’ look at ya .....”

After being chased out of the Player’s Room like an old mutt, Kousuke dejectedly made his way home and passed the time not doing much of anything at all.

Even drowning the pain with alcohol didn’t appeal to him.

The shame wouldn’t let him fall asleep, so there he sat, staring at his reflection in a cup of water in the dimly lit kitchen. All the while, only a single phrase ever left his lips ..... “Jus’ look at ya.”

A pair of eyes clouded from all the hours he’d spent staring at a smartphone screen and all the alcohol he’d consumed stared back at him on the water’s surface. Their lack of spirit came as a shock, almost as if he didn’t recognize his own reflection.

Shades of that veteran Sub League member’s face, the one who Hiuma had risked his own life and reputation to protect Yaichi from, overlapped with his own.

“..... Have I turned into that .....?”

There was a word that fit his situation perfectly.

“Gerontocracy.”

He had sworn in his youth that he would rather die than become like the veterans who threw their weight around for the most ridiculous reasons. But now, their faces were staring back at him alongside his own in the water.

How long had he been like this?

Back in his teens and twenties, he had enough energy to work through entire match records the night after losing a match without so much as a wink of

sleep. In truth, it was the other way around. Slamming the agony of defeat onto the board was the only way he could get to sleep.

By his thirties, beer and liquor helped him cope with the pain.

He became so tired during his forties that he needed to rest after matches before he could even look at a board again.

*Tomorrow's another day.*

*Rest up tonight, and my energy'll be back in the mornin' like it always was—.*

*"..... But even then, I didn't wake up feelin' the rush like in the old days ....."*

It started taking two days of rest for his zeal for Shogi to come back when it used to return overnight.

Inevitably, his research time fell to half of what it used to be and that only sped up the aging process. Working his way back up the slope after starting to descend required many times the energy and effort it had taken in his younger days.

Even so, Kousuke still felt he had to *do something about it* during his forties.

The guilt of wasting away, the pain of seeing his own decline pushed him onward.

However, even that feeling began to wear away ..... And eventually fade out entirely. Convincing himself that this was all part of the aging process, he accepted the fact that his skills would deteriorate with time.

Letting go of his passion for the game meant he wouldn't have to suffer like in the old days.

He took it as a sign of maturity.

Stepping back and watching his apprentice grow .....

*"..... That day, seein' Yaichi up there ....."*

What the drunken guests said at the celebration was just the spark.

The gasoline came from one day prior—at the Award Ceremony.

Kousuke realized something that day when he saw his apprentice receiving that certificate in the spotlight.

The one thing that kept him going all this time was having *Meijin Challenger* on his resume.

That phrase meant *he was the last one to lose when it mattered most*.

It wasn't anger or jealousy that his own apprentice had surpassed him.

Rather, it was being faced with the reality of his own failure and not being able to accept it.

And, he had vented all of that built-up frustration on his apprentice.

"..... Jus' look at ya ....., " Kousuke repeated on a loop, over and over.

He told himself that he wanted to be the Meijin many times over. All he'd managed to achieve was to *not become the Meijin* but he was waving that fact around like a badge of honor.

*Strong, stubborn and gritty.*

*No giving up until the very last move.*

He drilled those lessons into his apprentices' heads for years, telling them that was what it meant to be a Kansai Shogi player.

Had he followed through with that himself?

Fighting to the last piece on a Shogi board was common sense. Even amateurs could do it.

However ..... Very few could continue to fight away from the board.

What did he do on the days when he wasn't playing a match?

Aren't the ones willing to devote their very lives the true professionals?

*We are carving our lives away to play Shogi.*



Hiuma's words from that afternoon sounded in the back of his mind.

Those words became a strong wind that pushed Kousuke out of the Player's Room.

Yet—.

"..... Burnin' up," Kousuke whispered in the darkness.

There was an ember hidden deep within the coals that had long since gone cold, nothing more than a tiny spark.

Rather than snuff it out ..... Hiuma's words reached deep into his heart, found the flame he himself had forgotten and breathed new life into it. A new wind.

Now, it was Kousuke fanning that little flame.

"Burnin'."

A chilly night in the middle of February. The kitchen heater had been turned off hours ago, but the man repeated the same thing like a broken record ..... That he was too hot.

Keika came down from her second-floor bedroom and said in surprise as she came into the kitchen, "..... Father? You're still up?"

"That ain't it."

Looking at the confused expression on his daughter's face, Kousuke added.

"I'm finally awake."

The following morning.

Hiuma Kagamizu arrived bright and early at the Player's Room like he always did only to find someone was already there, busily wiping down the boards on his own.

"Kiyotaki-sensei ....."

“Mornin’.”

Suit jacket off and the sleeves of his collared shirt rolled up to his elbows, Kousuke stopped to wipe the sweat from his brow before looking up.

That face had so much vitality that it was impossible to recognize him as the Kousuke Kiyotaki of recent years ..... This wasn’t the same person Hiuma saw yesterday.

“It’s been eons since I couldn’t wait for mornin’ to come. Wanted to play Shogi with ya so much, jus’ couldn’t fall asleep.”

“Huh?”

“Hiuma. Please teach me Shogi.”

Sliding his arms through the jacket sleeves, Kousuke politely buttoned the front before giving the man a deep bow. A 9-*dan* Shogi veteran to a lowly Sub League member.

“Right now, I ain’t got any new strategies to share with any of ya. Far from me teachin’ strategy, ya young folks showed me a thing or two ‘bout how to be a pro .....”

The man who had lost the courage to honestly ask his apprentice and Sub League members to *teach me how to play* had summoned up what courage he had left to return here today.

Kousuke kept his head down as he spoke, unable to hide the fervor in his voice.

“I’ll run errands, do the prep work, anything ya need. I’d like to take the mindset of my trainin’ days and learn from ya startin’ on square one. I’m not lookin’ to steal yar hard-earned research. I’m here to straighten myself out. I can’t go out on a loss.”

“Sensei .....”

“What ya said yesterday, Hiuma, it opened my eyes. My whole body’s been

burnin' up since then, wantin' to play Shogi so bad I can't sit still. Haven't felt like this in ages ..... And it won't cool off until I get to play ya."

"B-but ....."

"What, Mr. Kagamizu? You're not going to play Shogi today?" a small boy who seemed to be hiding in Hiuma's shadow said in a high-pitched voice.

Peeking out from behind the man's back was Sota Kunugi.

He looked up at Kousuke with an innocent smile on his face and said, "In that case, I'll play against you, Kiyotaki-*sensei*. There's so much I want to know about Yaichi when he was growing up."

"Thank ya. If ya wanna know about Yaichi, I got plenty to tell."

"Sweet~≡"

Sota looked as genuinely happy as a kid who just got a piece of his favorite candy.

Hiuma, on the other hand, was hesitant.

Everything he had said to Kousuke yesterday was his honest opinion.

It was also how he truly felt.

At the same time, they were words that he as a Sub League member should never say to a professional. Should the incident become public, the association could very well demand his resignation.

—All I am is a dropout 3-*dan* who will never, ever promote to 4-*dan* .....

Shame consumed Hiuma in an instant.

Though he had intended to represent the Sub League as a whole .....

—Was I simply taking out my frustration and jealousy about not getting promoted onto Kiyotaki-*sensei* .....?

It was that thought, which prevented him from accepting Kousuke's earnest

invitation.

Hiuma couldn't look directly at him.

The bright morning sunlight reflecting off the beads of sweat on Kousuke's brow illuminated his stagnant position all too clearly.

The eyes burning powerfully behind Kousuke's glasses were too brilliant for one who had always resided in the shadows.

—This ..... This is a professional Shogi player .....

Steel that had gone completely dull regained its metallic luster all because Hiuma put it to a small flame.

—He's built differently. Much stronger than me .....

Hiuma felt he'd become nothing more than a larval cicada.

Entrenched in the *soil* that was the Player's Room, waiting for the day when he could spread his wings ..... Not to mention the fact that he had resided in the abyss that was Sub League longer than the seven years cicadas did in the ground.

He had forgotten what should have been instinctual, how to emerge from the earth and spread his wings and was now spluttering as a Sub League member .....

"Hiuma."

Kousuke extended his hand to that Sub League member.

Now, for the first time, he built up the courage to ask for exactly what he wanted.

"Please. Teach me how to play Shogi."

"..... It would be an honor to work with you, Kiyotaki-sensei."

Hiuma Kagamizu bent at the waist, deeply bowing his head as he shook the man's hand, almost as if clinging to his last hope.

This was the moment when a soon-to-become-legendary practice group that would be talked about for generations called the *Kiyotaki Classroom* was born.



# RYUBOSHI

## RECORD 3

Takashi  
Hinatsuru

OCCUPATION: Chef

HOMETOWN: Osaka-fu

FAVORITE THINGS: His wife and daughter

LEAST FAVORITE THINGS: His wife and daughter



# THE KIYOTAKI CLASSROOM

“Word is that Mr. Kiyotaki’s started something peculiar.”

Rumors like that started circulating through Shogi circles about ten days after Master floated the idea of doing family practice sessions.

“Like, he’s inviting newbies over to his house and feeding them.”

“So then, he’s trying to get info out of the dirt-poor Sub League members?”

“Nah, he’s just on his way out the door in the pros, so he’s trying to advertise his own classroom. Don’t you think?”

“I saw him walking around Denden Town in Nipponbashi yesterday.”

“Oh yeah? I saw him dressed up like some hip-hop dancer at the association.”

“Maybe all the losses got to be too much, and he flipped his lid?”

All of those rumors made it back to me.

..... What is going on here?

“Master sent out a message saying that he wanted to *reconsider* doing family sessions, so I thought he called it all off.”

“Did Grandpa-*sensei* start doing a different practice session?” Ai doesn’t understand what’s going on, so she’s moping around saying, “I wish he’d invite me if he were doing one .....

Even if that’s what it is, there’s too much that doesn’t make sense.

The thing is that you get ridiculed for losing streaks in this world. Draw too much attention and the rumor mill goes into overdrive. I know that better than anyone.

I got roasted during my skid right after claiming the Ryuo title, when I was losing to the Meijin in the Ryuo Title Match, got called *loli-con* or worse when I



took apprentices ..... My pro Shogi career has been filled with unjustified attacks since it began. The loli-con stuff is just cruel. I guess winning so much breeds haters .....

Which is exactly why I'm not believing a word of these rumors until I see some proof.

"..... Either way, it might be a good idea to go check on him."

"Yes! I want to see what his new practice session is like!"

"Who in the world did he find to work with him?"

"Do you think they're Sub League members?"

"It's the *hip-hop dancer* thing I can't wrap my head around. If you're going to make up stories, fine, but at least come up with something believable."

The Hawaiian shirts he bought in Hawaii: that I would get. But I can't even picture him dressed up like that.

And so, we went over to his place on a Sunday morning and——.

"We're home!"



“Oh! So, ya two dropped by?”

Some guy dressed up like a hip-hop dancer————!!

“Surprised? Just had a thought and asked the young’ens to teach me Shogi startin’ from square one.”

As hard as it is to believe, the guy looking as cool as a cucumber is actually my Master.

His whole outfit is coordinated with cool colors and an oversized flannel shirt ... with a hood! Look up hip-hop in the dictionary, and this is exactly what you’ll find.

No one would think this middle-aged man walking over *tatami* mats in oversized cargo pants was really a pro Shogi player in his fifties. Even his accessories of choice are too good to believe.

What happened to my Master .....? Can people change this much so quickly if a hole pops open in their brain somewhere .....?

Still trying to process everything, I take a look around.

The *tatami* room is crammed wall-to-wall with boards and the Sub League members surrounding them rank from *dan* all the way down to the lowest *kyu* guys. There are even some damn good amateurs not associated with the pros in here.

And, there’s a scroll written in Master’s vibrant letters hanging in the alcove.

“Let youth shine through.”

..... Shine? It’s blinding .....

Not just youth ..... Other things, too .....

“Stop starin’, would ya? I wanted to break outta my old Shogi senses that were holdin’ me in the past .....,” Master shyly scratches his nose and says. “Just didn’t know where to start. So I decided to spice up my look. What do ya think?

It don't mean much comin' from me: I think I look pretty cool, man."

"Y ..... you're off the hook, yo!"

I can't keep this up.

"B-But ..... Where'd you get those clothes?"

"They were in the back of my closet."

"Mr. Kagamizu?!"

Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan* has shoehorned himself in behind one of the Shogi boards in the *tatami* room. "Haa ....." He makes a shy yet noble smile and warmly says, "I totally understand Kiyotaki-*sensei*'s desire to *change* ..... So I gave him the clothes I used to wear back when I played Shogi on the street."

Huh? Come again?

Shogi??? On the street????

"Pulling those clothes out for the first time in years brought back so many memories ..... Reminded me who I was back then, how I felt ..... All my dreams of big money and success the day I left my hometown in Miyazaki live on in that apparel .....!"

This guy is a lot weirder than I thought ..... Mr. Kagamizu never talked like this before .....

I hear someone lightly thumping their way down the stairs as all this was going on.

"Ah! Yay! Yaichi≡"

"Sota, too?! ..... What's that cable for?"

"I'm getting a new computer hooked up upstairs. Can you believe this house didn't have Wi-Fi?! How can you get anything or do anything without Wi-Fi?! It's like they were living in the nineties!"

"..... Were you in Nipponbashi yesterday, by chance?"

“Yep! Kiyotaki-*sensei* and I went to buy computer parts. He said I could get anything I wanted, so I built a beast that can run all sorts of software at the same time!”

Sota gives me the Wi-Fi ID and password before going back upstairs.

Once he did, a different Sub League member calls us from the front door.

“Kiyotaki-sensei! Today’s instructor is here!”

“Great! Let him on through!!”

## Instructor?

I turn toward the front wondering just who it could be ..... Only to find that today's *instructor* was standing much closer than I expected. Seriously, I can feel his breath.

“Fufu! Here I am☆”

A-ranking pro Shogi player Jin Natagiri 8-*dan*.

[illegible]

Dubbed the Switch Hitter, he's an all-rounder who trains with the Meijin himself.

But, on a more personal level ..... he's an *all-rounder* who swings for both teams, if you catch my drift.

“Wha?! Master! Why are you yelling like that?!”

“Don’t be so rude, Yaichi.” Master scolds me for panicking. “Natagari 8-*dan* is a full-fledged A-level pro and known as one of the best researchers in the Shogi world. Always willin’ to share a thing or two with low *dan* pros and Sub Leaguers, he plays practice matches with ’em out of the goodness of his heart whenever he’s in Kansai for a match. He deserves a lot of respect. That’s why I invited him here.”

Mr. Natagiri adjusts his long bangs while Master introduces him.

“Oh, it’s no biggie ..... I just like young men.”

“I see. Surroundin’ yarself with passionate youth is what keeps ya young at heart, yeah?”

No, he meant exactly what he said!

When this guy says *like* he means *like* in *that* way!!

I try to convey that message with my eyes, but Master is nodding along with Mr. Natagiri as if he believes every word the man says. I can’t take this.

“Realizin’ somethin’ at yar age that took me until now to figure out ..... I can see why the Meijin wants to practice with ya. Please, impart yar passion on all of us!”

“Fuu≡”

I don’t think Master will ever figure out that the new world Mr. Natagiri is part of exists no matter how old he gets.

Not that I want him to.

“I’ve always been quite interested in Kansai’s young ones, so this is a win-win ..... And of course, I’ve been interested in you too, Kiyotaki-*sensei*. Fufu. Uh-fufufufufufu .....”

The Switch Hitter looks around the room like he’s appraising merchandise.

Ai and I decide to hang back and observe the practice session to make sure that Mr. Natagiri doesn’t try to impart the participants with anything more than *passion*.

Sota comes down from the second floor as everyone gathers around one board.

*Dan*-ranking Sub League members take turns against Mr. Natagiri as he breaks down the latest trends for the up-and-coming players in easy to understand

chunks. Very well done.

The thing is that Master keeps asking questions and Ai starts joining the discussion.

Everyone here was nice enough to welcome her input rather than just shoot her down because she's in grade school. So, she's not afraid to speak her mind and I think she's getting a lot out of it. Master and Ai look like they're having a blast .....

Watching all that from outside their circle .....

"What a great atmosphere, don't you think?"

"Keika ....."

"I had had some doubts that this would all work out when he came to me with the idea. I'm sure that Father was also a bit scared of working with Sub League members."

Scared .....

"There was a generational wall between them. But, once everyone's desire to *improve* broke it down, more young players than I ever imagined opened up to him. After Mr. Kagamizu and Sota said they were staying the night on the very first day, more and more people kept showing up, and I kept getting asked to cook ....."

It looks like Keika has been cooking in the kitchen this whole time. She still has her apron on standing next to me and I can smell fresh rice wafting out of the kitchen.

"I know people are saying this and that about Father right now, but I love this atmosphere. This version of my father is so much better than when he was suffering on his own. If it's Shogi that's keeping him awake at night, I can be right there with him."

Shogi has always been at the center of this household, meaning Keika was

always the odd one out.

Just when she thought she could join everyone, Master brought up retiring. Hearing him say that had to cut pretty deep. I'd be willing to bet that Keika is the one who's been suffering the most after that award ceremony until now.

It's true that everyone gathered here has skill levels and rankings all over the map. There are even a few girls here.

I can understand people criticizing this strange and slightly bizarre setup.

But they all have one thing in common.

A strong love for Shogi.

Seeing something important that is dying off in the pro Shogi world today, I'm almost jealous.

"..... I'm sure this'll work out. After all, no effort goes unrewarded," I say, meaning every word.

At the same time ..... I feel like, as someone aiming for the top, I shouldn't get involved with these practice sessions. I do feel left out, but the Shogi world isn't forgiving enough to let me worry about it.

"Wheeeew ..... I'm exhausted, but that was a lot of fun!!"

Ai sounds rejuvenated somehow, coming over to me after concentrating on Mr. Natagiri's lectures all the way to the end.

"Umm ..... Master? May I join these practice sessions? Grandpa-*sensei* said I could invite the other girls to join in, too ....."

"Of course. I can rest easy knowing you're here."

While it's not for me, I think this is the perfect environment for my apprentice.

While yes, it does worry me that Mr. Natagiri has claimed the seat right next to Mr. Kagamizu (who would look right at home in a fashion magazine), he's a



full-grown adult and can handle himself. Who knows, he might make a few new (deeper level) discoveries himself.

“..... Well, Master. I’ll excuse myself.”

“Ah. I ain’t gonna see ya out but be careful on yar way home,” says Master Kiyotaki without looking up, rolling his shoulders sitting at the board after challenging some Sub League members to 10-second Shogi practice matches.

“I invited a Shogi software programmer to drop by tomorrow, so we can hear what he has to say. This practice session’ll keep goin’ 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Drop by anytime!”

## CHANGES

“..... Is what’s been up. Seeing my Master dressed like some hip-hop dancer was surprising enough, but Mr. Natagiri showing up was a total shock.”

*“Indeed.”*

I see Ayumu fix his cape collar on the corner of my tablet screen.

Though we stopped doing these long-distance practice sessions during the Ryuo Title Match, we started back up again once the new year came around and have done a few already.

Software-based strategies may be moving up in the world, but that doesn’t mean you can use them against a human opponent as is.

Ultrasonic magic gods use against each other need minor adjustments, a tune-up of sorts. So Ayumu and I try bouncing our own *magic* off each other.

Lesser players will get killed off in an instant, so I need someone of Ayumu’s caliber to know if these strategies have a chance against the best players around.

Someone at his level won’t just let the magic run its course and will point out all the weak spots, so this is good practice for both of us.

I brought up what Master is doing in the middle of one of our sessions and Ayumu gave me an interesting take on it.

*“Shogi strategies are strikingly similar to fashion trends.”*

“..... Come again?”

*“It takes a great deal of courage to discard clothing that you found appealing and adopt a trend as your own. Even more courage is necessary to discard clothing that was once held in great esteem. I’m stating that Shogi strategies share those traits.”*

“Well, when you put it like that ..... You could be right.”

I’d never really thought about it, but they do have a lot in common.

Master developed his Shogi senses in a time when *yagura* was said to be the best around. That’s why no matter how bad *yagura* strategies are doing statistically, he’d never think they wouldn’t work.

It’s just like the people who flat-out refuse to upgrade to a smartphone or won’t use messenger apps.

So long as the mind isn’t willing, it wouldn’t matter if they know how useful they are. There are things that people won’t use just because they don’t feel like it.

Although, all that changes in a flash as soon as they try them out.

*“However, that Master of yours is peeling off the apparel he has worn for decades in order to step into a brand-new world. He’s discarding the warmest, most comfortable attire he owns. Rejecting his former self all to become stronger ..... Imagine the willpower! He should be applauded!!”*

Ayumu strikes an over-the-top pose in the corner of my screen.

If it’d been anyone else, I would’ve thought they were making fun of me. But Ayumu takes everything so seriously that I can’t get mad at him.

*“Perhaps Natagiri 8-dan differs from our generation in that he needs to feel new strategies, absorb them through his skin in order to adjust. From his perspective, he may be merely using the most efficient method he knows to change his own senses.”*

“..... Could be.”

Just as everyone has their own sense of style, everyone has their own way of getting stronger.

But we are the young ones. We control the trends.

So long as that's true, we should stick to what our own senses say is right.

There's no need to adjust to anyone else.

It's our privilege as the young—as the strong.

"I never understood why you always stuck to those weird clothes no matter what people said, but now I think I have an idea. It gives your Shogi an edge ....."

*"Kukuku ..... That being the case, why not don the black cape I purchased for you in secret?"*

No, I'd rather not.

*"The time is nigh, Drakin! Shall we continue our clash of good and evil to determine which shall conquer the world?!"*

"Wouldn't have it any other way! And, stop with the *Drakin* already!"

Returning our focus to the placement matches, we get back to testing out our Shogi senses on one another.

Master wasn't the only one to change once the Kiyotaki classroom got started.

Kansai's Sub League started transforming as well.

"Hiuma's stopped accepting jobs as of late ....." I swung by the association's office to do some part-time work like signing diplomas and happened to hear Mr. Mine mumble under his breath. He's the Kansai Association's walking dictionary who we like to call the *Principal* behind his back.

"Other Sub League members are filling in, but none of them are as polite and attentive as Hiuma. Of course, part of that is our fault for depending on him too much ....."

Mr. Kagamizu changed more than anyone.

He used to take any job at the drop of a hat but now he's rejecting everything except the bare minimum of match recording required by the Sub League. Even when it came to match recording, he introduced a new move.

Mr. Kagamizu won't sit on a cushion anymore.

It seems that Master told him that was how it used to be done back in his day, so it's not exactly *new* ..... This perseverance through pain that borders on Buddhist monk training has gotten mixed reactions.

"Hiuma, why not use a cushion?" asked a pro who couldn't ignore him any longer in the middle of a match.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'm fine."

"..... You'll damage the *tatami*."

"Shall I remove it from the floor?" Mr. Kagamizu answered in all seriousness. He's kept his *no cushion policy* going since that day.

Here's what he said when someone asked him about it later.

"I understand he was asking out of kindness. However, I believe I am who I am today because I've always gone along with kind words. I want to change that in my final 3-*dan* division season and break through."

Although he managed to avoid retiring last season, he wasn't part of the race for promotion at the end.

Big Sis and Sota, even younger than her, are now at the bottom of the 3-*dan* division. It seems like that impending sense of doom has changed him.

What he did started a trend and soon none of the match recorders in Kansai were using cushions.

The new wave of changes didn't stop with the Sub League, and extended down to the Practice League beneath them.

“Today I played with the other girls in our practice group, but Asuka and Akira joined us, too! It’s more fun the more people there are to play with!!” Ai tells me with a big smile on her face as we eat a late dinner.

The Grade Schooler Practice Group has stopped getting together at my apartment now that the Kiyotaki Classroom is open.

Well ... the placement matches are about to hit the grand finale, so I don’t exactly have time to be looking after a bunch of grade school girls. So, yeah, that helps me out a lot.

Y-yeah! I’m not lonely or jealous at all! Not one bit!!

“Oh? Sounds like you had a great time.”

“The best! Grandpa-*sensei* has placement matches to worry about, but he still takes time to teach girls like us. They were scared at first because he’s been a pro for a long long time, but now everyone loves him!”

“Th ..... That right .....

I don’t care ..... I’m not jealous .....

“We exchanged messenger IDs and made our own group! Now we can talk about that day’s matches even after we go home and talk about what happened at school! Grandpa-*sensei* said messaging with us makes him feel young again. He always says the funniest things, so everyone loves talking with him!”

“R ..... Really .....? Group messaging .....

I ..... don’t feel jealous ..... at all .....!!

“Especially Charlette! She loves his beard, calls him *Gwampa*≡ all day long and plays with his whiskers until he finally plays Shogi with her! Isn’t she cute?  
≡”

“!! Say ..... what .....?”

T-that damn geezer .....! Taking advantage of the situation to make moves on my future wife?!

“Oh! Keika is going to join us next weekend for a girls Shogi night! It’s a sleepover with all girls ..... May I go?”

“No!! I’d get too jea- ..... I won’t let you go to such a frivolous practice session! The Kuzuryu Shogi family tree is officially breaking away from the Kiyotaki! I’m kicking them out!!”

“Uwheeee?!”

Well, even though that happened, the girls’ playing styles have clearly changed since they started going to Master Kiyotaki’s practice sessions. Of course, for the stubborn and grittier.

“Practice League activities are running much longer these days, and it’s causing problems,” said the head of the Practice League, Yoshitsune Kuruno 7-*dan*, through clenched teeth.

“But worst of all are the mothers calling in to complain that *their children’s right pant legs have strange wrinkles above the knee* ..... At this rate, the association should be paying me overtime.”

Or so he claims, but Kuruno-*sensei* himself has won a few placement matches by hanging on to the end and coming back for dramatic victories .....

While all these waves of change from the Kiyotaki Classroom were spreading through Kansai .....

A match that could epitomize the Shogi world’s revolution was about to take place in Kanto.

## MYNAVI SEMIFINALS

It's the middle of February. A special arena inside the Kanto Shogi Association in Sendagaya is being used for a Women's League Match for the first time in ages.

The competition to decide the best female Shogi player in the country, the Mynavi Women's Open Tournament, has reached the semifinal stage.

This match pits last year's Challenger, Women's King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

Against ..... Ai Yashajin Women's 1-*kyu*.

A current women's title holder going against a grade school girl, the youngest Women's League member in its history—that news shot its way around the Japanese archipelago and people took notice.

Judging by all the cameras jammed into the arena, I'd say there are more media people here than for pro title matches.

"Not to mention that little girl is the youngest Ryo in history's apprentice, so that alone would make headlines ..... I was hoping she'd be able to play in a quieter place, though," I whisper under my breath from my spot outside the arena as I keep an eye on the pre-match proceedings.

The sliding doors are wide open because there isn't enough room for all the press to fit inside at once. They're allowed to take pictures until the fourth move.

Normally, Masters wouldn't come to matches like this with their apprentices, but Ai's usual chaperone Akira got cold feet when she saw how much attention the match is getting. "*I-I cannot! Sensei, please go!!*" she begged through teary sobs.

So, here I am in Tokyo. Ai is still in grade school, so the association was happy



that I'm accompanying her.

"Tsukiyomizaka-*sensei*, the piece flip is yours," says the match recorder, Tamayo Rokuroba women's 2-*dan*. It's pretty rare for high-ranking players like her to work matches like this, but she apparently volunteered.

"..... Five Pawns face up."

The result: Ai will be playing on defense.

A long, silent sigh flows out of the arena as soon as the words left her mouth.

They must be thinking the match would be more competitive with Ai on offense, but now she won't have a shot ..... That kind of disappointed sigh. The players themselves are staying quiet.

Ms. Rokuroba makes the announcement at last.

"The time has come to begin. Women's King Tsukiyomizaka, please start the match."

"I'm ready when you are," Ai says with a polite bow, her voice strong and clear.

On the other hand, Ryou has yet to say a word. Maybe she can't psych herself up for the match having to go against a little girl, but she doesn't look like herself sitting at the board. Even her opening move is strange, quietly opening her Bishop Path with a gentle *snap*. Then she hides her face behind her fan.

Ai's response comes right away.

Her hand reaches out like grabbing bread off the breakfast table, perfectly swift and natural.

Ryou makes a noise for the first time today once she sees that move.

“Aghh?”

Everyone who knew anything about Shogi in the room couldn't believe their eyes. It's like they all thought they were hallucinating.

Then they thought Ai had simply made a mistake ..... Finally, the meaning behind that move dawns on them and they all gasp at once.

“Gahhh!”

Ai didn't open her Bishop Path—she advanced the Pawn in front of the Bishop, the one *next to it*! That takes guts .....!!

“*Goteban kakutofu?!*”

“Bishop Head Pawn, here?! Snotty little brat .....!!”

*Crack!!*

A thundering snap echoes through the arena. Seriously, it sounds like somebody's arm just shattered.

It was Ryou's fan. The two broken pieces are still clutched in her hand. That's her way of telling the rude little girl across from her exactly what she was about to do.

But that little girl, willing to use an ambush strategy against a title holder on the very first move, just smiles and takes Ryou's overwhelmingly aggressive aura head on.

“Now ..... Shall we dance?”

The chaos had begun.



Eight hours after the match started—it came to a silent end.

“.....”

The one blue in the face with anger and biting down on her lip ..... is the title holder sitting in the upper seat.

An avalanche of reporters representing over forty different media outlets flow into the arena and circle around her to point their cameras at the 10-year-old who conquered the chaos.

At long last, the victor opens her mouth to speak.

“I played through every one of your match records,” Ai Yashajin spoke softly, as if trying to comfort the defeated girl hunched over in front of her. “You play offensive, hair-trigger style Shogi and are particularly good at aerial battles. You never back down from a fight, even challenging male opponents head-to-head. In my opinion, you have better sense than most of them.”

“.....”

“However, it’s only supported by thorough research. You play your moves as soon as you see them, but they’re not based on Shogi sense. *You don’t read the board because you’ve researched it before.*”

“.....!”

Ryou’s head snaps up like it was shot out of a cannon and she stares Ai down.

“Today, you abandoned that completely.”

The overnight *Cinderella* of Women’s Shogi locks eyes with the Women’s King and calmly, confidently explains the reason she won today.

“Wings only have meaning in pairs. Only when Shogi sense is paired with research will they allow you to fly freely. But .....,” Ai let’s that word hang in the air a bit longer than she needed to, like a bold and devious little imp. “An angel with a clipped wing isn’t an angel.”

Ai then says directly to the fallen Aggressive Archangel's face.

"That's just a human."

With that, Ryou's head falls with a *crack*.

The match had been decided long before the final move. It was actually over eight hours ago.

The moment Ai advanced the Pawn in front of her Bishop ..... And Ryou threw her research out the window all to make her pay for it.

"Whoa, holy cow."

I scroll through news sites on my smartphone while sitting in the bullet train bound for Shin-Osaka Station, and the headlines just keep coming.

"Youngest Women's League Player in history on pace to become the youngest Mynavi Woman's Open Challenger ever!"

"First, a Sub League member. Now, a title holder falls!"

"Kansai's newest heroine *Kobe's*



*Cinderella* has arrived! Will she challenge Naniwa's Snow White?!"

They're all about Ai Yashajin.

But, it's not just the Shogi sites. Regular news media have picked up the story as well. It's a modern-day Cinderella story.

"Win the next match, become the Challenger and you'll be promoted to 2-*dan* already. You're Cinderella, all right."

"..... Stop calling me that."

That brand-new star is sitting next to me on the train, quietly resting up.

She acted so audacious back at the association. It turns out that it took a lot out of her. Well, she devoted everything she had physically and mentally preparing for this one match, so I suppose it's only natural.

She's so worn out that little body of hers might just disappear. She might think she's hiding it from me, but her hand won't stop shaking.

Eight hours ..... No, weeks of nervous energy can really take their toll.

— ..... Hot.

She probably has a fever.

I can feel the heat radiating off her body from the seat next to her ..... Very hot.

Not wanting to get recognized by any of the other passengers, I had my exhausted apprentice sit next to the window and bought one of those surgeon masks at a shop inside the train station for her to wear. It's official, she's famous.

Ai hasn't even been part of the Women's League for three months yet.

Despite that, she already outranks half its members.

Knowing how talented she is, I shouldn't be surprised ..... But, this still feels like a dream.

“You’ll face Machi Kugui in the finals. She’s very strong, holding the title Yamashiro Ouka for four straight seasons and earning the nickname Machi the Tormentor.”

“She’s that weird girl who keeps following you around with that grin on her face, right *Sensei*?”

“Following me around .....? She’s a Shogi journalist.”

Sure, she writes about me quite a bit, but there aren’t many Shogi journalists in Kansai and I’m a title holder. That’s all there is to it.

“Do you have a plan?”

“Of course,” she snaps.

“I should’ve known. It was stupid of me to ask.”

“..... On the other hand, Machi Kugui’s Shogi is unique because it looks like there are openings everywhere when really there aren’t. So, I’d like to practice attacking *anaguma* defenses rather than depending solely on my own strategy .....”

“Yeah, that would be a good idea.”

Go against Machi, and you know the first thing she’ll do is make an *anaguma*.

That should be easy enough to stop once you know it’s going to happen, but ..... it’s hard to deal with once the King gets protected all the way to the corner .....

“Pulling off an *anaguma* in modern Shogi is as good as notching a point toward a victory,” I add.

“I don’t see any talent in Machi Kugui’s Shogi, but I think she’s aware of it. That’s why she builds walls around her King.”

“Machi spends time building up her *anagumas*. Breaking through one when it’s finished is more trouble than it’s worth, so taking it out early might be your

best bet.”

That’s one of modern Shogi’s answers.

“That or show her an opening like Bishop Head Pawn and attack from behind.”

“I think you understand Machi won’t fall for cheap taunts like Ryou did, but more importantly, opponents won’t fall for the same move twice. That’s the kind of world you live in now, so don’t be naïve.”

“I know that ..... You don’t have to tell me,” she snaps again and looks out the window like giving me the cold shoulder.

Getting concerned, I keep pressing.

“If you get a lead, stay calm and keep extending it. Keep playing until the last move even if you fall behind. Big Sis always says she gets tired even before playing against her. Machi is just that tenacious. She’s stubborn. Even her strategies don’t budge.”

“I won’t lose to anyone in a contest of will.”

She says, looking me square in the eyes before turning toward the window again.

“..... That’s the one lesson you’ve made crystal clear .....”

“Hm? Sorry, you need to speak up with that mask on. I didn’t get a word. Could you say it again?”

“I said that all a certain stupid *sensei* has done is make me build up my patience.”

“That’s mean!!”

This fourth grader is making fun of me! ..... Not that it doesn’t happen all the time. But, considering that I was trying to give her advice, it wouldn’t hurt to be a little nicer .....



“I’ll come up with something, okay. If possible, I’d like to play against a strong *anaguma* user beforehand.”

“How about going to one of the practice sessions Master Kiyotaki has started doing recently? Seems like a lot of Sub League members show up.”

“Wasn’t that supposed to be a family session?”

She doesn’t sound amused.

Akira must’ve told her about it.

“The vibe isn’t bad at all. Ai Hinatsuru and the other girls go there.”

“What is it: a practice session or a potluck? Do people take them seriously?”

Ai practically spits out each word.

Well, she’s not the only one with that opinion. I mean, more than half of Shogi pros think that Master has started doing some strange volunteer program.

—Though it hurts that my own apprentice thinks so, too .....

On the other hand, I don’t totally disagree with them. Which is why I haven’t joined in one of those sessions myself.

I guess seeing the torn expression on my face made Ai feel like she said too much.

“Also, doesn’t Machi Kugui have a lot of connections with the Kansai Sub League? It would *taste bad* in that sense, as well .....

She backs up earlier statement with another reason.

*Taste bad* is Shogi slang meaning basically *it wouldn’t feel right* or *feeling sick*.

“I get what you’re trying to say, but ..... Fighting at the top means that your opponents are pretty much set in stone. Get hung up on it now and there’ll be no end to it.”

“I’m aware. But I don’t want to on a personal level.”

“Ah, yeah. Everyone’s like that at first.”

Honestly, I don’t mind how nitpicky she is and, with talent like hers, everything could work out just fine. It also helps that many pros don’t think practice sessions with other players are as important as they used to be.

I stretch my arms and legs before sinking back into my seat.

“You’ll be all over the news tonight once we get back to Kansai. Don’t be surprised if journalists come knocking on your door, so prepare some comments now just in case.”

“..... What a pain.”

“That’s work, too, you know.”

However, there was no rush to get a scoop on Ai Yashajin that night. It just so happened she got overshadowed by another story.

The news that Tatsuo Zaou 9-*dan* announced his retirement.

## RETIREMENT PRESS CONFERENCE

*“Called the Don of Naniwa, the man who has been the driving force behind Kansai Shogi for decades has suddenly called it a career,”* says a female news anchor on TV all in one breath.

Ai Yashajin and I got to Shin-Kobe Station and decided to wait for Akira to pick her up at a café inside the station. They’ve got the news on.

*“Earlier this afternoon, professional Shogi player Tatsuo Zaou (80) announced that he wishes to retire despite being younger than the retirement age set by the Shogi Association. Along with four title seasons to his name, Zaou 9-dan has also had a successful singing career. This was the scene at the Shogi Association.”*

The picture changes to a location I know very well.

Tatsuo Zaou 9-dan sat facing a wall of reporters in the Kansai Association’s multipurpose room, microphone in his hand and refreshed look on his face.

*“Why I’m callin’ in quits? I gotta say first and foremost my knees can’t take sittin’ on my ankles anymore. I was thinkin’ ’at I could still play once my brain got goin’, but it’s jus’ too painful.”*

Zaou-sensei keeps talking through all the camera flashes going off one after another.

*“Another reason’d be all this new computer Shogi don’ make a lick ’o sense to me. I jus’ don’ get it. Kinda like tryin’ to do a two-man comedy show in English and Japanese, it don’ feel right chargin’ people to watch. Recently we’ve had the youngest title holder ever, the youngest 3-dan and the first girl in the 3-dan division. That’s a lot ’o firsts, so Kansai’s got a lot goin’ for it. Seemed ’bout time for an old solider like me to hang up the helmet and ride off into the sunset.”*

Then, his tone took a solemn turn.

*"I wasn't cut out for the dog-eat-dog stuff from the start. Winnin' in Shogi meant kickin' some poor feller to the curb, and 'at never sat well with me. Losin' felt worse so I put up with it. After all, a player don't eat if he don't win, eh? No money. But I always wanted to enjoy Shogi without worrin' 'bout wins and losses. Shogi puzzles have always been more fun than playin' on a board ..... So yea, I'd say 'at 'bout sums it up."*

He started taking questions after that.

*"Sunday Newspaper. You have provided daily puzzles for the last 50 years and become the undisputed Shogi puzzle guru. Do you plan on continuing to submit puzzles?"*

*"I'm the one who should be askin' ya if I can keep goin'."*

*"Hanshin Sports. Zaou-sensei, you topped the charts as a singer and became famous for your professional wrestling commentary skills. Does announcing your retirement today mean you're going to commit more time to those ventures .....?"*

*"Had 'bout enough 'o singin'. An' I don't recognize half the techniques wrestlers use these days, so commentatin' ain't gonna happen. Heck, I can't even commentate on Shogi no more."*

That got a laugh from the media people.

Once the laughter died down, a voice I know very well came out of the screen.

*"Shogi journalist Mato. You mentioned Shogi software in your earlier statement. What is your opinion on professionals who are adopting software strategies?"*

*"Part 'o me knows it's the changin' times."*

The Shogi veteran started to say in the same monotone voice as before.

*"But I gotta say, I don't think the Shogi world needs to follow this trend. Puttin' their minds to work and findin' the answer under their own steam is what made*

*players so great, not 'cause they can work a computer. I'm worried goin' too far that direction could brin' the Shogi world to its knees. Don' matter how strong the strats get, I don' find Shogi interestin' at all these days."*

*"I see ..... Thank you."*

*"Ah, yea. There's one more reason I decided to call it quits."*

Zaou-sensei said as if he remembered something.

*"It surprised me to find that tryin' to enjoy Shogi while takin' the competition out of it ain't no fun at all. Playin' Shogi without tryin' to win is 'bout as much fun as watchin' horse races at home without puttin' any money on the line. 'At was a big discovery. That don' mean I ain't gonna try to enjoy my last bout, mind ya."*

*"Am I correct in assuming that means you want to win?"*

*"Well, ya wouldn' be wrong."*

That's where the interview ended.

The news program switches to a different recording, one showing Chairman Tsukimitsu saying, *"Even in retirement, I will be consulting Zaou-sensei as the director of the Kansai Shogi Association to receive his input on how Kansai Shogi should proceed from here."*

Honestly, after hearing what Zaou-sensei had to say ..... I don't know what to think.

Announcing his retirement is one thing, but his comments on software strategies almost felt like he was criticizing me personally.

But, I can't let my own apprentice see that, so I just say, "..... His knees must be in really bad shape."

"That reminds me, he did say *sitting properly* was painful during the New Year's party."

She sounds sympathetic, which is unusual for Ai.

“Grandp ..... My grandfather also suffers from joint pain, especially on cold days.”

The news program sums up the report with this.

*“This announcement means Zaou-sensei’s final Shogi match will be his C-2 placement match against another prominent Kansai Shogi player, Ryuo Yaichi Kuzuryu. Going against the player who prevented the Meijin’s Eternal Septuple Title and 100th title season last winter is sure to draw a great deal of attention from across the country.”*

## B-2 DIVISION 9TH MATCH

“Well, I’ll be off.”

After keeping the Kiyotaki Classroom running like usual the day before his match, Kousuke Kiyotaki casually bid his daughter Keika farewell at the front door.

Both Kanto and Kansai had scheduled B-2 9th round matches to be held on this day simultaneously.

As the last match before the finale, players referred to it as L-B.

A simple way of saying *last before the final*.

B-2 plays ten placement matches, therefore making the 9th round L-B. As promotion and demotion scenarios were coming into focus, tension befitting the looming life and death matches took hold over the arena.

This was it for Kousuke Kiyotaki. Lose today, and his demotion would be guaranteed.

Even with that fact looming over him, Kousuke was much more relaxed than he usually was the morning before a match.

Playing Shogi was all he could think about—an unbridled excitement to get the placement match underway.

“Ahh ..... That’s right.”

No sooner had Kousuke slipped on his shoes than he turned to speak to Keika.

“I’m playin’ Mr. Muroga from Kanto. Ya know him?”

“Muroga 9-*dan*? Of course, I do. He’s Mr. Three-Sheets, right?”

This nickname was not an attempt at humor.

“Match recorders use record sheets that can hold 80 moves, and his matches

last so long that the recorder needs three sheets to get everything down, yes?”

“Yeah. I’ve gone against him ten times, and we’re at a 5-5 split ..... Couldn’t get more evenly matched if we tried.”

Kanto’s Muroga and Kansai’s Kiyotaki.

Considering they never met in preliminary matches, the two play against each other quite often.

With similar ages and playing styles, hard-fought slugfests ensue whenever they square off. The pair never interacted with each other anywhere other than across the board. Each considered the other to be a worthy foe.

“Playin’ him means I ain’t gettin’ home ’til real late. I’ll grab a drink with somebody when we’re all said an’ done, so don’t bother waitin’ up for me.”

“..... But .....

“Don’t go makin’ that face. I ain’t gonna run again, trust me.”

Kousuke poked fun at the recent incident with a hearty grin and his daughter saw him off with a quick, “Good luck!” Saying any more, she feared, would result in sending her father off in tears.

Of the 13 matches taking place simultaneously in Kanto and Kansai, the one between Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* and Hiroshi Muroga 9-*dan* was drawing the most attention.

Kanto’s veteran, Muroga 9-*dan*, was playing on defense.

Particularly adept with *anaguma*, his stubbornness was well documented.

*“When swords break on the battlefield, I’ll fight the enemy with my bare hands. If I lack the energy, I’ll glare daggers into them. Should I become blind, I’ll stab them with my tongue!”*

That was the motto he lived by. He always signs things with the word



*dauntless.*

—Both of us are sittin' at 1 win an' 7 losses. Further still, we both got a demotion point .....

Kousuke waited for Hiroshi's arrival in the upper seat within the Kansai Association's Onjyoudan no Ma Arena, possessing both the match's first move and the determination to win even at the cost of losing blood.

Only the top two B-2 players would promote to B-1, the bottom five would receive demotion points.

The loser of this match would be immediately demoted to C-1, while the winner would be forced to wait for other matches to conclude to learn their fate. This battle would take place at the edge of a cliff where the margin for error was razor-thin.

"..... Or we could both fall hand-in-hand, too."

Kousuke grinned, the whiskers of his mustache arching with his lips as Hiroshi Muroga stepped into the arena, coat still draped over his shoulders.

Removing it, Hiroshi said a few words of greeting before he sat down and began lining up pieces.

"The time has arrived. Please begin the match," said the match recorder Hiuma Kagamizu 3-*dan*, sitting on his ankles without a cushion. It goes without saying he never intended to break that posture.

Both players and the match recorder radiated such an intense, focused aura that other people kept their distance from their board as if a barrier were pushing them away.

Hiroshi wasted no time in deploying an *anaguma* in the early game, pinning all his hopes on his bread-and-butter strategy.

Meanwhile, Kousuke decided to use a well-balanced attack similar to his apprentice Yaichi Kuzuryu's playing style rather than his own well-defended

*yagura* castle.

—With youthful vigor!!

That thought filled his mind, front and center.

Each player was granted six hours of waiting time for placement matches. That's more than players received for one-day title matches.

However, that time melted away at a surprising rate.

Sun setting before they knew it, the lactic acid buildup in their brains weighed their bodies down like unseen shackles.

Neither player was aware of their own posture, be it sitting on their ankles or cross-legged, as everything from the waist down had gone numb.

Sense of balance fading, Kousuke placed his fists on the *tatami* mat to support his upper body as he leaned forward and continued pondering his options.

Fatigue was starting to set in as the last of his waiting time slipped by.

“..... Oops, bumped that one up.”

Kousuke lightheartedly smirked at himself after trying to abbreviate his new *outfit*. As it went with fashion styles, learning how to coordinate new *fresh off the shelf* strategies was going to take some time.

“But ..... Nobody breaks them in without wearin’ them!!”

“Kiyotaki-*sensei*. Please proceed playing one-minute Shogi.”

“Alright!!”

The late game had arrived. Kousuke held the advantage, though just by a thread.

However, not only was Hiroshi's *anaguma* solid, he had over an hour of waiting time on his side.

A winning recipe for *anaguma*. All Hiroshi needed to do now was draw out

the match until his time-constrained opponent made a mistake.

Yet, Kousuke was strong from here on out.

Revitalizing his reflexes and battle instincts through numerous training clashes with younger players resulted in one of the most accurate and precise sessions of one-minute Shogi ever played.

Above all, Kousuke forgot about everything except the match in front of him in that moment.

He was entirely focused on getting through one-minute Shogi in his yet-to-be-broken-in *clothing*.

He forgot to be scared. He forgot what was riding on this match, what he would gain with a win and lose with the loss. Shogi was all he thought about. He was youthful.

Meanwhile.

“Two options ..... Two options .....,” Hiroshi mouthed to himself, barely making a sound, as he tended to do when reading deep into the board.

The options were to attack or to defend.

So long as he chose correctly, the *anaguma* would win. That’s how Hiroshi saw the big picture.

Unfortunately for him.

“Two ..... aren’t there?!”

Hiroshi’s two options had disappeared from the board without him realizing it.

His chance to turn the tide of battle slipped through his fingers at some point while he was defending, waiting for his opponent to make a mistake, right along with his waiting time.

Only then did Hiroshi realize the weight of the battle had shaken him.

That quiver deprived him of *distance*, the most important aspect of playing an *anaguma*. He was unable to attack when it was necessary.

Then came the recorder's emotionless countdown.

"50 seconds—one, two, three, four ....."

Hiroshi's panic reached its zenith. The two options that normally came to him on the spot were nowhere to be found in the chaos that had overtaken his mind.

"Seven, eight, nine——."

When Hiuma called the 59th second.

Hiroshi reached out to the board to move a piece, any piece, to avoid losing. However, his hand came to a halt over the board once he realized that it was already too late and said:

"I have lost."

12:14 a.m. Kousuke Kiyotaki claimed victory after 209 moves.

"..... I'm incredibly sorry."

"Not ya fault ....."

Hiroshi apologized right after his surrender.

Whether he was apologizing for running out of time, to all the fans who had been supporting him, or to the Shogi gods ..... Kousuke wasn't sure.

There was one thing he did know.

—— ..... I won .....

Only that.

Since all other matches had concluded, the review session and interviews with reporters all took place over the next 30 minutes in the arena.

Then, the review session over and pieces neatly returned to the box, Hiroshi

Muroga donned his coat but continued to sit quietly in front of the piece-less board with his arms folded across his chest.

With that L-B victory, Kousuke still needed help to remain in B-2 but his hopes lived on.

Which two players would promote from B-2 was left to be determined on the day of the final match.

# THE TASTE OF NANIWA

“To today’s win.”

“Cheers! ..... Thanks, Mitsuru.”

Clicking together cups filled with hot sake, Kousuke downed the rice wine sake in one quick gulp.

—When was the last time I was drinkin’ to celebrate rather than drown out the pain?

Kousuke had invited Mitsuru Oishi, who was analyzing matches late into the night at the association, out for a drink at the Shouben Tanbatei and was now thoroughly enjoying the taste of victory along with exquisite sake.

“Care to join us for a round, Takashi?”

“I’d be honored. There we are .....”

Takashi Hinatsuru prepared a cup for himself from his spot in the kitchen without a word of protest. Raising the cup to Kousuke, he drank it all in one swift swig.

Happily grinning as he watched, Kousuke said, “I gotta ask ..... How long’s it been since we came to Hozenji, Mitsuru?”

“Just the two of us? I’d say around ten years, give or take. Still, I drop in on my own every now and then. In this area at least.”

Mitsuru poured himself another cup, refilling it yet again.

“Minami is actually a bastion for jazz music, it’s just not many people know about it. Hozenji Temple’s grounds play host to a jazz festival each summer.”

“That right?”

“Back in the 1920s, musicians displaced by the Great Kanto Earthquake

rushed into Osaka and jazz took hold right here. The scene has all but disappeared by now, but I used to have a part-time gig playing piano in Minami back when I was in the Sub League.”

“That’s how ya met yar wife, ain’t it? Make sure ya treat her right.”

“Haaaa .....

“The old vets always said the key to winnin’ title matches was havin’ a stable house. A guy with yar skills countin’ wins and losses just ain’t right.”

Mitsuru was currently caught between a rock and a hard place in the King Title Match after losing consecutive matches to Kanto player *Crown* Yo Okito.

Including the A division placement match, Mitsuru had dropped three straight to the Crown. Momentum was clearly against him.

“Things are fine at home, and I don’t have anything personal against that Okito guy, either .....

“Software, eh?”

Yo Okito may have been the first professional player to lose to a computer, but it’s also said that this event triggered Shogi software’s incorporation into modern research methods. Many of the top players, including Kousuke himself, were fiercely against this trend at first.

However, the situation was changing now that all these new software-based strategies were producing results.

“The newest programs don’t bother with human match records and spit out match data they made by goin’ against themselves. Gettin’ stronger that way, too. That’s why people say they’re beyond us and why their senses are totally different. I took a close look for myself, and the things come up with some interestin’ ideas.”

“Well, you sure sound well-informed.”

“Been researchin’ with the youngens. The strategy makin’ waves against Rangin’ Rook right now is called Silver Halo *Anaguma*——.”

Kousuke leans across the counter, excited to impart his knowledge.

Stuck listening to an explanation of the very strategy making his life miserable, Mitsuru grimaced and kept downing cups of sake.

“Good grief. Here I thought I was doing a favor for Keika, but ..... Who’s supposed to be doing the cheering up here?”

“Keika?”

“Not just her. Even Ginko and Yaichi have been worried about you.”

“That so .....? Some Master I turned out to be.”

“No, I’m jealous, to tell the truth. I’m not exactly a people person, but those kids you raised up are an exception. They don’t beat around the bush, just like their Master.”

Mitsuru has never been one to mince words. What he said could be taken at face value.

Trying to hide his loosening tear ducts behind another cup of sake, Kousuke asked, “What about yar little girl? ..... Asuka, yeah? She’s as good a kid as they come. Was nice enough to drop by my practice session the other day.”

“She’s a quiet one. Spitting image of someone I know.”

Shades of a father peeked out from the competitor’s visage for a brief moment as Mr. Oishi continued.

“Only thing is that she’s figured out how Shogi works as of late. She can get the gist of how her father is doing just by looking at the match record ..... Hard to play like that.”

“..... I know what that’s like. Went through it myself.”

The two men now shared a bond that was absent in their younger days, both



were Shogi players and fathers of Shogi players.

“Here you are, *kantodaki oden*,” said Takashi Hinatsuru, sensing a break in the conversation and putting bowls of piping hot compressed seafood, vegetables and eggs on sticks in front of them.

Kousuke’s eyes lit up the moment he took a bite and asked, “Tell me somethin’, Takashi. Is it just me, or is the flavor a lot stronger than the one I had after losin’ my placement match .....?”

“..... You noticed?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but ..... Do ya change the flavor based on wins and losses?”

“It’s called the Flavor of Kyoto, Taste of Naniwa——.”

Takashi leans over the counter as he explains.

“The classy dishes served to nobility and the Imperial family all started in Kyoto. Since that cuisine plays a role in ceremonies, proportions must be equally balanced while maintaining gorgeous presentation at the same time. In other words, preserving the traditional *form* passed down through the generations is important and bringing out each ingredient’s *flavor* is what defines elegance.”

“So, that’s *Flavor of Kyoto*, eh .....?”

“Yes. On the other hand, Naniwa——cuisine here in Osaka doesn’t have a definite form. Actually, sticking to form will get you nowhere.”

“Following patterns ..... won’t work?”

“Osaka is a city of commerce. Wining and dining potential clients at restaurants or catered events happens all the time, and business people are counting on the food to help close the deal. Every person has their own preferences already and each individual person’s tastes will differ depending on how they’re feeling at the time.”

“.....”

“That’s where a chef shows what he can do. Of course, being able to satisfy the customer’s pallet is a must, but what taste is the customer looking for in the first place? Figuring that out and adjusting the menu on the fly is his chance to shine.”

“A contest of strength with no standards to follow? That’s Kansai Shogi right there,” said Mitsuru with a grin.

Kousuke followed him up with a serious look in his eyes.

“What taste do customers want? The only way to know that is to step into their shoes. That’s where it all leads. Which makes me think the chefs with the richest life experiences are in demand. Your bout lasted much longer today than last time, Kiyotaki-*sensei*, so I added more flavor.”

“Flavor of Kyoto, Taste of Naniwa .....,” Kousuke repeated several times, letting the words roll off his tongue.

His final placement match opponent was one of Kanto’s most prominent young players. He would never win by employing the latest strategies. This was the world of Kyoto cuisine.

However, that would not be the deciding factor in this battle.

—Experience I got in spades. The experience of fightin’ through the Sub League, risin’ through placement matches and standin’ on top of it all in A.

He was fully aware of his strength at the time, as well as his weaknesses.

Where he was weak then ..... That’s where his opponent would be weak now.

Even if he couldn’t compete in terms of youth, everything he’d built up over the years ..... Couldn’t he bring out that flavor? There would be plenty of waiting time during the placement match to stew.

With all these thoughts going through his head, Kousuke found it strange.

—How long's it been since I was still thinkin' 'bout Shogi right after a match?

What's more, not the agony of defeat ..... but having this much fun.

“Mr. Kiyotaki.”

Mitsuru spoke up after Kousuke fell silent.

“There's a jazz bar on the way to Dohtonbori. Care to join me?”

“Nah. Sorry, but I'm callin' it a night,” said the cheerful Kousuke Kiyotaki as he slid into his coat. No matter where he was, the snap of Shogi pieces was all he would hear.

“..... Rejected, eh? Here I thought rejecting was always my part to play.”

Mitsuru cracked a joke with a somewhat rejuvenated look in his eyes as he watched Kousuke say a quick thank you and walk out the door. Then he started bringing his cup of sake up to his lips to down what was left.

However, his hand stopped halfway, and Mitsuru didn't take another sip of alcohol.

It wasn't a stiff drink or music that he needed right now.

“That was delicious.”

With that, Mitsuru was about to make his own exit when he turned on his heel.

“Are you sticking around for a while?”

“Yes. Another two weeks, I'd say.”

“Then you should drop by my bathhouse sometime. Sure, it doesn't have all the bells and whistles you've got up at the Hinatsuru, but ..... I think you'd enjoy the sting of a nice hot bath at mine.”

“Thank you very much. I will.”

Bowing his head, Takashi was satisfied with his performance today.

For warriors, a *rest* was simply a way to gear up for the next battle. He was just happy that his cooking had lit a flame within Kousuke and Mitsuru's hearts.

Cuisine wasn't the star in Osaka. The spotlight belonged to the *people* who dine.

"..... I wonder what kind of food Ai makes for Kuzuryu-*sensei* ....., " Takashi Hinatsuru mumbled to himself as he watched Mitsuru disappear into the night, his thoughts on his not-so-far-away daughter.



# RECORD 4

## 9-DAN

Tatsuo  
Zaou

|                |                              |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| PLAYER NUMBER: | 68                           |
| BIRTHDATE:     | November 15, 1937            |
| HOMETOWN:      | Osaka-fu                     |
| MASTER:        | (the late) Gingo Jizou 8-dan |



## THE LAST MORNING

“Master! Breakfast is ready!”

“Great.”

10th round C-2 division Placement Matches are today—the finale.

The breakfast that Ai whipped up for me this morning is a full assortment of all my favorites. She went all out.

But, I give her a stern warning as soon as I see *karaage* fried chicken on the table.

“Ai ..... How many times have I told you it’s too dangerous to make fried food on your own?”

“It’s okay! I made these in the microwave, so I didn’t have to fill a pot with oil!”

She tells me that it’s possible to let the oil sink into the chicken skin and then fry them up normally in the microwave, which apparently has a setting just for that these days.

Her well beyond grade school level cooking skills never cease to amaze me .....

“Now I see. These are a lot less oily than the usual *karaage* chicken is. Actually, this style might be better for breakfast anyway.”

“I really wanted to give it that extra crispiness that only oil can give so you’d be extra *crisp* for today, but .....

“..... Thanks. Placement Matches are a battle of endurance. I need to fill up in the morning, so I have enough energy to make it to the end. This will help a lot.”

My apprentice's superstitions adding a little more pressure, I take my time and start filling up my stomach.

I've won all nine Placement Matches so far.

What has me worried is that, including me, four players in C-2 are undefeated right now. Two of them are ranked higher than me and there are tons of people with one loss above me as well, so losing today makes promotion pretty much impossible. Talk about rough.

—It's all good. I just need to win. Considering who I'm playing, the chances I'll promote are pretty high .....

I organize my thoughts while chewing the homemade breakfast my apprentice made just for me.

By the way, there are so many people in C-2 that Placement Matches are usually spread over two days, but L-B and final matches are all played at once.

This is done to prevent any mental advantage someone might get from knowing their opponent's state of mind during the match. Other divisions do it the same way. So many fates are intertwined between the Kanto and Kansai Associations that the arenas take on a vibe like the Roman Coliseum right before gladiators fight to the death.

In the middle of all that, the Don of Naniwa is playing his final match.

—Not the most serene way to go out, but .....

Only then did I notice my palms are soaked with sweat and realize how nervous I truly am.

Wiping my hands on my shirt out of my apprentice's line of sight, I try talking about the food to get my mind off Shogi.

"The chicken is great, but the *ohitashi* greens in soy sauce are top-notch. Let's see, there's spinach, chrysanthemum, and ..... Is that parsley?"

I can taste the savory spinach with every bite of the three-green mixture, the



parsley adds a little extra crispness to every bite. The chrysanthemum's aroma adds an extra flare.

The soft flavors help me relax all the way to my core.

"I thought too much fried food would upset your stomach ..... And, I need to prepare for your party tonight, so I'll make sure there's plenty of *karaage* then!"

Ai sounds like she can't wait for tonight to come.

"The whole Grade Schooler Practice Group is coming over after school today to help get everything ready! We'll be analyzing the match along with you and be ready to celebrate when you get home!!"

The girls had been getting together at the Kiyotaki Classroom all the time recently but decided to have a party over here this time. Was it because I got a little jealous the other day?

I'm so happy—blood could shoot out my nose, but——.

"There is no such thing as a guarantee in a competitor's world."

Holding that happiness back with sheer willpower, I calmly say to my apprentice, "The difference between victory and defeat in the pros is always paper-thin. You can't let your guard down until the moment your opponent throws in the towel."

"S-Sorry ....."

All Ai's excitement disappears before my eyes.

"You're under a lot of pressure, and here I am, your apprentice, making a big fuss ..... You're right. Getting ready to party before the battle even starts is weird ....."

"Yeah. No match is set in stone. The only thing you can do is get yourself as ready as possible and go into battle at your best. Just like what I've been doing for today."

Keeping my strict *master face* intact, I say, “..... Which means, be as ready to party as possible, got it?”

“.....!! Yes!! Master!!”

Her eyes, so close to tearing up, suddenly shine.

I give her a gentle pat on the head as I go over all my reasons why I’ll win in my mind ..... All so her party preparations don’t go to waste.

*Zaou-sensei* is retiring because *sitting on his ankles hurts*.

In a battle of attrition like Placement Matches, he should be dying by the end. Surely, he’ll be in no shape to play Shogi.

Then, there’s the difference in our rating.

I’ve got more than 500 points on him.

—Statistically speaking, I should be able to take him even with a piece handicap in his favor .....

Making a mistake is what scares me. If I’m going to lose, it won’t be from getting outplayed.

Which is exactly why ..... I absolutely can’t let my guard down.

## SECRET PLAN

“The longest day in the Shogi world.”

That’s what people call the last day A Division Placement Matches take place.

Since the best players in the world clash with their lives hanging in the balance and the most waiting time allotted for any Shogi match on their side, the matches tend to run long—that’s why.

“..... Which would make today *the most painful day in the Shogi world*, wouldn’t it .....?” I mumbled to myself, killing time in the Kansai Shogi Association’s Player’s Room.

It doesn’t matter what division it is, there’s always a tense vibe on the last day of the Placement Matches.

“TV cameras get to the association at the crack of dawn, wait for A division players to show up and follow them inside the building ..... The break rooms overflow with people and fans come in droves to listen to live commentary .....”

It’s like there’s a festival going on or something.

But, it’s not like that for C-2 ..... We don’t get all the fanfare.

Only three out of the fifty of us will promote. Talk about a tiny window.

Plenty of *Meijin hopefuls* get stuck in C-2, spend their best years going nowhere and end their careers as just that: *hopefuls*.

*Retirement* is waiting for them should they lose—death as a Shogi Player is a real possibility.

This is the second time I’ve felt this heavy atmosphere, but I’m also getting déjà vu. This vibe ..... Where else have I felt it .....?

“..... That’s right. Granddad’s funeral was just like this .....”

The Player's Room heater is still off, so it's cold enough in here to see my breath.

Considering that so many more media and players than usual are at the association right now, the whole building is eerily quiet.

That's especially true around the players in line for promotion or demotion, everyone is being extra cautious and giving them plenty of space ..... Which is why no one even tries to come in here despite the fact that I'm in the Player's Room.

That's exactly the same as what happened at Granddad's funeral back when I was in junior high.

He loved Shogi and spent more time with me than all of his other grandchildren. I remember everyone keeping their distance, quietly watching me as I went up to his casket.

The first person to speak to me in the middle of all that was——.

"Huh? Why aren't you in the arena yet?"

Big Sis comes into the Player's Room dressed in her usual sailor-style school uniform.

It's 9:52 in the morning. The match will start in eight minutes.

"Look who's talking, Big Sis. What about school?"

"Third year students don't have to go if they don't want to. Graduation is coming up anyway."

"Oh yeah ..... I remember those days."

I nod, reflecting on my own time as a third year.

Since I was already set to turn pro, I barely went to school at ..... Wait.

"Hm? Are you sure? There are still classes going on, right?"

"I already know what I'm going to do next year, so I should be able to do what

I want.”

“So, you’re skipping classes .....?”

I stopped right there once I realized there was something I couldn’t overlook in what she’d just said.

“Come again?! You’ve got plans?! I haven’t heard anything about that!!”

“What’s wrong with you, Yaichi? Are you boycotting your own match?”

“Of course not! I’m asking you what you’re going to do after graduation! High school? Or are you——.”

“Looking to get married, if that’s what you’re going to ask.”

Damn. She’s not going to give me a straight answer, is she?

“..... Normally, I’d just walk right in and take the upper seat, but .....”

Giving up on it, I glance over at the monitor and start talking.

Dragon King Ryuo is the Shogi world’s strongest title so, logically, the upper seat should be mine ..... It’s just.

“Today is Zaou-*sensei*’s final match, right? Forcing the Don of Naniwa to take a lower seat in his last pro match would be kind of .....”

The board where I’m scheduled to play is on the monitor right now.

But I can’t see where Zaou-*sensei* is sitting from this angle. It’d be so easy if he would just set a watch or his fan next to the board on one side or the other .....

“And? What will you do?”

“Right now, I’ve got no choice but to let him decide.”

“Sounds about right ..... That would make things easier.”

I bet Big Sis is working through her own seating problems right now, nodding in all seriousness like that.

She has two of the highest-ranking titles in Women’s Shogi all to herself, but

she has to take the lower seat most of the time since she's still training in the Sub League.

I'm sure she knows when to sit in the upper seat, but ..... Worrying about this kind of thing before the match is like trying to fight with a thorn in your foot. Concentrating is impossible.

"Seven minutes left ..... I should probably get going."

"Yeah."

"Oh, that's right. Big Sis?"

"What?"

"How long are you going to be at the association today?"

"I'm planning to be here until you get your results."

"In that case, would you leave with me after my match is over?"

"You've got your promotion interview, right?"

"Zaou-sensei is the star today. Even if I do win and get promoted, I don't think the media people will spend that much time talking to me ....."

"Say we leave together, where to?"

"My apprentice says the Grade Schooler Practice Group will be throwing a party at my apartment. I was wondering if you'd like to join us."

"Are you sure? The average age will go up if I go."

"H-H-How would that be a problem?! I've already told you many times before, I don't think of little girls like that——."

"What you getting all defensive for, perv? Idiot," says Big Sis, sticking her tongue out and making a rare attempt at humor and then adds with a heart-racing smile that could end up distracting me from the match. "Sure ..... I'll wait for you."

Getting to the arena four minutes early, I was surprised to find most of the reporters were huddled around the board and aiming their cameras from *behind the lower seat* in the Oujyoudan no Ma Arena.

The old man sitting on the other side of that media wall casually takes a sip out of a clay teacup before giving me a quick wave.

“Sorry ’bout this. The seat was open so I jus’ plopped on down.”

“Of course, *Sensei*. I don’t mind at all.”

It’s weird for players to smile at each other before matches, but Zaou-*sensei*’s heartfelt grin is just so infectious I can’t help but smile along with him.

“Pardon me,” I say as I work my way through the media people and sit down in the lower seat with my back to them.

In all honesty ..... Zaou-*sensei* picking the upper seat like this took that thorn right out of my foot without any pain at all.

Now, I can focus on the match.

—Being the Ryuo won’t protect a young guy like me from getting roasted online for stealing the upper seat from a decorated veteran like Zaou-*sensei* .....

According to regulations, the Ryuo takes the upper seat. It’s common sense in the Shogi world.

But there are a lot of people who don’t know that.

Pictures of the arena will be printed in newspapers all around Kansai and I’m sure it’ll be on TV, too. It’s like that saying: *departing birds leave a clean nest*. Think of it as the old veteran wanting to go out on a high note.

I’d love to send him off with a good death, but .....

—Stop, stop! I can’t get caught up in appearances. I need to win, no matter how ugly it gets .....!

“It is time to begin. Please start your matches,” say all the match recorders the moment I finish lining up the pieces ... as if they were waiting for me.

“I look forward to our match.”

“Yea. As do I.”

Zaou-*sensei* lowers his head, returning the respect I showed him. Then, with countless camera flashes going off all at once, he and I hold our bows for the same amount of time we would for a title match.

Offense and defense for Placement Matches are all determined beforehand.

I’m on defense for this one—and I’ve got a plan up my sleeve.

“Now then .....

First move.

Taking another sip of his tea, Zaou-*sensei* almost lazily opens his Bishop Path.

Then says, while all the camera shutters are clicking away, “Sorry, but I’m gonna break posture. All the pins an’ needles in my knees won’ let me stay upright .....

He winces in pain as he crosses his legs on the floor mat.

It looks like he’s really hurting. There’s no way he could keep that up during a ten-hour all-out match like this one.

“Though, I’ve been goin’ on mountain hikes rather than bein’ stuck rehabbin’ these days. The knees ain’t as bad as they used to be. That don’ mean I’m takin’ back my retirement, so rest easy, ya hear?”

The journalists managed to stifle their laughter at the most Osakan of Osakan jokes from the elderly player, but I can see it in their eyes.

Once I was sure the giggles and camera clicks had died down.

“ .....



I quietly open my own Bishop Path, too.

My specialty, the Move Loss Bishop Exchange.

“..... The Ryuo’s drawing his legendary sword!”

“So, he’s not showing the old man any mercy in his last match, I take it .....?”

The journalists whisper amongst themselves as they leave the arena. Zaou-*sensei* may have his legs crossed, but his spine is straight as an arrow as he moves to attack.

But.

Zaou-*sensei*’s hands keep speeding up the further we get into the match. Soon a strange situation develops on the board—one that I’d planned on happening.

“..... Repetition Draw, eh?” says Zaou-*sensei* quietly under his breath, masking his emotions completely.

Defenders playing to trigger Repetition Draws is a brilliant tactic in modern Shogi.

Even better, I can whittle down my opponent’s waiting time by sticking to my research and playing as quickly as possible.

It doesn’t matter if people call Repetition Draws *Shogi’s cancer*. If forcing one increases my chance of winning by even a fraction of a percent, I’m doing it. That’s modern Shogi.

The match recorder’s monotone voice sounds as soon as the same move repeated itself the fourth time.

“The match will be replayed in 30 minutes.”

I stand up from my seat at the board and leave the arena. The hallways are filled with erratic footsteps going off the walls. Other matches aren’t even close to reaching a climax.

30 minutes later.

“The time has arrived. Kuzuryu-*sensei*, please start the match on offense.”

Even more media people are crammed in here at the start of the rematch than there were at the beginning of the first one.

First move. I advance my 7 Six Pawn to open the Bishop Path. Countless cameras flash. I stay still for as long as I would during a title match so that the media people can get the pictures they need.

The wall of reporters and journalists turn their cameras to face the Don of Naniwa as soon as I let go of the Pawn.

Zaou-*sensei*’s first move—advancing the Pawn in front of his Rook to 8 Four.

“.....!!”

“?”

It sounded like he said something as he moved his piece. “Last time, so migh’ as well” or something like that?

First move—8 Four Pawn——.

“..... King’s Fist, hmm .....”

Hardcore members of the Static Rook party love doing this. The philosophy is *show your intention and watch the opponent*. Considering that keeping things closer to the vest is the better strategy in modern Shogi, it goes without saying that the King’s Fist has gone out of favor.

——Is he trying to show me how confident he is as the veteran player? That’s generous of him .....

Being so forthcoming is fatal in modern Shogi.

It’s the exact opposite of me aiming for a Repetition Draw to wrestle the first move away from him. Is this his way of backhandedly criticizing my strategy?

“Alright then .....!”

I play my next move just as the media people were leaving the arena. 6 Eight Silver, just as I planned.

A journalist who happened to see it absentmindedly mumbles to himself.

“*Yagura* .....”

Shock and surprise race around the arena like waves through water.

“The Ryuo’s using a *yagura*?”

“Huh? Not a Bishop Exchange?”

“Didn’t he say *yaguras* are dead .....?”

The players and the Sub League member working as the match recorder across the way in the Ongedan no Ma are staring this way ..... I can feel their eyes on my back.

Zaou-sensei wastes no time opening the Bishop Path and I use the Silver I just advanced to stop him from taking my Bishop.

With both sides on board—this match will be fought with *yagura* castles.

Of course, there’s a reason why I abandoned the Bishop Exchange Single Knight Jump that’s won me so many matches in a row and went with the *dead yagura* instead.

—Modern Shogi theory.

Single Knight Jump is nothing more than a curveball. It only hits home until people get used to seeing it, and my research is *not quite complete just yet*.

It’s hard to use a strategy like that with so much waiting time because eyes will adjust.

And, while it’s true that the defender usually determines how the match will unfold, it’s also a fact that offense has a slightly better winning percentage overall.

Using an offensive *yagura* against our younger players researching with software would be dangerous ..... But, this is the Placement Match with tons of waiting time and I absolutely cannot afford to lose. Having a *yagura* castle on my side is reassuring.

—I know the *yagura* standards like the back of my hand. I'll let it all come to this .....!

Phase two of my secret plan.

Just as I visualized, the match turns into a Double *Yagura*.

But, Zaou-sensei makes a bizarre move and changes up his strategy in a way I didn't see coming.

—Rapid Attack *Yagura*? Isn't that formation .....?

It's nothing new.

But it's certainly nothing I'm used to seeing.

Kind of like hearing a song that was popular when you were really little, you know it but only the gist. That kind of strategy.

I have no idea what made it popular or why it disappeared ..... It's one of the many *bubble* strategies that have popped up in the Shogi world.

*Vanished strategy.*

That's what we call them.

The last time someone used it has to be more than ten years ago. Everyone knew how to deal with it by then and that defense became part of the standard.

—Which means I should be safe as long as I stick to the standards, but .....?

Something doesn't feel right.

Things are lining up and I can feel the red flags going up in my fingertips.

—What to do .....? Go with my gut or play standard .....?

I leave my hand hovering over the board and commit a lot of time to thinking this through.

But I'm not retracing my steps or reading the board to figure out what to do next. I'm trying to step inside my opponent's head.

—Think! Zaou-sensei has to be going for something, but what .....?!

Then again, playing 8 Four Pawn on his opening move like that, I highly doubt Zaou-sensei has a strategy fully researched and ready to go. No matter how hard I think about it, *I can't come up with a reason not to stick with the standards.*

"..... Which reminds me ....."

In his last placement match, Zaou-sensei lost because *he didn't know the standard and played himself into a trap.*

Which makes it highly likely he simply doesn't know this one either.

"..... Alright."

I've made up my mind. I'm playing standard.

I shift my King and prepare to change my castle combination.

Zaou-sensei has been a Shogi pro for over 60 years. That makes my two years and change look like nothing. The experience gap is enormous.

However, I have more experience in one area ..... an overwhelming understanding of *standard* knowledge shared among pro players and the ability to use any one of them.

Modern Shogi theory.

In other words—build up a stronger defense and hit the other guy until they fall!

# VANISHED STRATEGY

Moves pass one after another at a quick pace.

“..... Fuuuu .....”

Zaou-*sensei* sometimes makes these long sighs still sitting cross-legged and playing fast rather than using his waiting time.

He looks almost indifferent, moving the pieces like that.

—He doesn’t have much waiting time left, so I suppose he can’t help it.

I match his pace and charge ahead. It’s what the standard calls for. The more waiting time I have in the late game, the less likely it is for Zaou-*sensei* to come back and beat me.

His formation is so old, it almost smells like the 1960s. We’re 30 moves in, and I bet that’s how far back you have to go to find another match like this one.



Sticking to modern Shogi theory's *build a stronger defense than the opponent* way of thinking, I slip my King down behind a rock-solid wall ..... but ...

—My 7 Seven Silver is getting in the way .....

Then again, this formation isn't bad at all. How could it be? It's standard through and through.

Zaou-sensei's King doesn't have much defense at all, and both his Rook and Bishop are stuck behind his own front line, useless when the battle starts.

The thing is ..... the Gold he sent to attack rather than defend his King has some serious firepower behind it.

—Shifting my formation might be a good idea .....

I move the one piece of deadweight, the 7 Seven Silver, back to 5 Seven and firmly into my territory.

This is called a Flowing *Yagura*.

Seeing what I did, Zaou-sensei pinches a Pawn on his piece stand and tells me, "Ah, 'at's right. 'Bout those mountain hikes I've been doin'."

".....?"

"Ya find plants people think went extinct long, long ago growin' by the wayside when ya explore new paths."

— ..... What's he talking about?

"Sunlight comin' down 'n all the folks walkin' in and out changed up the environment ..... Turns out the seeds were jus' buried the whole time."

Zaou-sensei takes that Pawn and deploys it right in the middle of the board like he's planting a seed in the ground.

The battle is about to start.

I advance my right Knight to reinforce my front line.



“..... I’d say it’s ’bout time.”

Zaou-*sensei* sends a Pawn toward my newly-advanced Knight, sacrificing it—.

A tidal wave is coming my way with two Silvers and a Gold leading the charge! Here he comes .....!!

“But! I should be able to hold him off .....!”

Our pieces converge on the center of the board and start disappearing one after another.

It’s the late game from here on out, where either one of us could end up packing it in very soon.

I commit all the waiting time I had saved up to make absolutely sure I handle Zaou-*sensei*’s attack the right way. Carefully, meticulously, I read deeper and deeper into the board so I don’t have to depend on other match results to promote into C-1.

That’s when something completely unexpected happens.

The deeper I read ..... The more I see Zaou-*sensei*’s attack getting through. Was my defensive formation not as strong as I thought?!

“The Bishop and Gold are in the way .....!”

Rather than protecting it, half the castle is blocking my King’s escape like piles of trash in the road!

“Where?! What’s causing it .....?!”

The waiting time I had set aside to read my victory instead goes to trying to figure out why my *yagura* castle is so weak despite following the standards to the letter.

And, no matter how many times I think it through, all signs point to one thing in the early game.

7 Seven Silver.

“..... That can’t be right! The fifth move?! It ..... c-couldn’t be .....?”

—A standard that craps out that early doesn’t exist anywhere in the world!

All my analysis produces this one single unbelievable result.

“Argh .....!!”

Flexing my fingers as I reached out over the board, I grab my Knight and advance it with authority, determined to prove myself wrong.

It’s just ..... no amount of determination can fix a weak formation.

And I’m starting to get an idea why it turned out like this.

—Zaou-sensei’s mountain hikes .....

What makes sense ..... would be that as standards changed and evolved, this one lost the ability to deal with an older strategy .....

“Ya noticed, eh?”

Zaou-sensei says with his eyes on me.

“Back in my day, 7 Seven Silver was branded as a *bad move*. It made ya weak in the middle, so a defensive Rapid Attack *Yagura* or Central Rook *Yagura* would plow right through ya.”

“.....!”

So, that’s why.

That’s what turned the Rapid Attack *Yagura* into a *vanished strategy* ..... Offensive players stayed away from the dangerous 7 Seven Silver path and chose to take safer routes .....

“But, ’fter that ..... When I was past my prime, the standard started goin’ back through 7 Seven Silver,” says Zaou-sensei as he reaches over the board.

The Silver he picks up slashes into the Knight I’d just brought forward,

capturing it for himself.

“Ghhh .....!!”

Pain zips through my right arm like something bit a chunk out of it as I take Zaou-sensei's Silver. Trading a Knight for a Silver actually works in my favor, but—.

“The seed was always here. Jus', it's bloomin' today.”

Firmly in control of the match, Zaou-sensei looks sturdy as a rock as he begins an assault.

Blow after blow ..... It's almost like the match has already been decided.

“N .....!!”

—No!!

My heart screams out as I fight back tooth and nail.

Trying to attack his King would only force him to bolster his defense, so I commit everything I have to slowing his attack by deploying all my pieces in my own territory.

Holding strong.

Like a toddler trying to fight back by throwing toys ..... This can't even be called holding out anymore, just buying time.

But what choice do I have?! What else am I supposed to do?! Just resign to another season in C-2 and give up?! Yeah right!! I'm the Dragon King Ryuo, the strongest player in the Shogi world!!

“Futile. I ain't lettin' ya outta this.”

Zaou-sensei ramps up the offensive yet again, pushing my line further and further back. Only then do I remember that this old man is also the Shogi puzzle guru.

Then—on the 86th move.

Zaou-*sensei* puts a Pawn in front of my King with the same delicate touch as if he were trying to comfort a crying baby.

“.....Aa ..... Aah ..... hh .....”

That little piece gently put in front of me felt almost like a dagger placed before a defeated evil tyrant was being told to atone for his actions by taking his own life——.

Fourteen minutes later, I bit the bullet and accepted defeat.

# THREE MINUTES, SEVEN MINUTES, FOURTEEN MINUTES

“..... I lost,” I finally say after taking fourteen minutes to compose myself.

A Letdown Stick got drawn on the match record. Along with the fourteen minutes it took for me to come to terms with losing.

“.....”

Knowing that this atrocious, pathetic match record will live on forever makes me want to kick and scream right here.

But, even worse than that ..... My promotion is as good as gone.

That fact hits me hard. So hard that I couldn't even do a review session.

I must look like a total wreck. The match recorder cleans up in the blink of an eye and stands up to take the match record to the association office.

Now just the two of us at the board, Zaou-sensei mutters a few words out of the blue. Words I never saw coming.

“I didn' think 'ere'd be much hope for ya if ya threw in the towel at the drop of a hat.”

“.....?!”

“I thought I was invincible back when I took a title, too. I remember watchin' others and thinkin': *why'd an'body play such weak Shogi?* That went double fer the ol' timers. Though, 'at's when I got whipped by a geezer who I thought couldn' hold a stick to me ..... I ain't the only one neither. Happened to Seiichi, too.”

“Chairman Tsukimitsu .....?”

That's when it finally hit me.

Exactly who the player named Tatsuo Zaou really is.

That he had fought all sorts of *big name* players with multiple titles like the current Meijin for years as Kansai's only title holder all by himself.

And ..... That he identified Chairman Tsukimitsu's talent at an early age and kept watching over him like a guardian of sorts.

"Shogi changes. New strategies are poppin' up all the time. Young'uns now are a whole major piece stronger 'an they were back when I was a young buck."

"....."

"But, 'ere's somethin' 'at never changes. Shogi is a battle of minds. No matter how strong computers get, no matter how long we analyze 'em, it's people that play. 'At's constant. And people who walk along the same path tend to hit the same walls 'n trip over the same stones. Jus' like today's Shogi."

The person in front of me right now ..... is my future self.

How I'll look after 60 some years have passed and fighting in over 2,000 league matches, me in the distant future.

"I'd throw in the towel after three minutes. Seiichi, after seven. Yaichi Kuzuryu takes fourteen, eh .....? Now, is that because yer made of stronger stuff or jus' a sore loser?"

Zaou-sensei dryly chuckles to himself and continues.

"'Ere'll be more walls in yer way. Some on the board, some off. 'Ere'll be times that heart of yers'll feel like breakin'. Look at this match record when 'at happens. 'Ese fourteen minutes of ya sufferin' to the very last moment'll prove yer talent."

I didn't say anything, or even nod. I just sat there, listening.

There's just too much emotion swirling around in my chest ..... The agony of

defeat, the despair knowing that I won't promote is just too strong ..... I couldn't understand the meaning behind what Zaou-*sensei* was saying.

Until finally, a storm of media people swarm into the arena.

The retirement interview starts up right away.

Someone representing a Shogi newspaper poses the question, "How do you feel now that you have played your last match?"

Tatsuo Zaou 9-*dan* answers with a brilliant smile.

"65 years as a pro, an' I did ever'thin' I set out to do. Ain't got a single regret."

## JOINT HALLUCINATIONS

The Player's Room is too quiet for how many people are in here. It's like everyone took a bucket of water to the face.

Players, Sub League members and reporters alike are all watching the board displayed on the monitor.

And, one more thing.

The analysis board between the first female member of the 3-*dan* division ever and the youngest member of the 3-*dan* division ever—in other words, the board where Sota and I are analyzing Yaichi and Zaou-*sensei*'s Shogi.

"He's checkmated. There's no getting out of this one," Sota announces at almost the same instant the software comes to that conclusion as all the anxious reporters surrounding us get ready to go to work.

Zaou-*sensei* plays his next move.

After a long, long wait————Yaichi puts his hand on the piece stand.

"The Ryuo lost!!"

The reporters who had been glued to the monitor all get to their feet at once.

"Zaou-*sensei* snaps the Ryuo's winning streak in his final match!"

"An 80-year-old beat a 17-year-old title holder? What is he, a specter?!"

"Was it overconfidence?"

"Nah, that was a heck of a match ....."

"Well, the Ryuo's chances of promotion are pretty much nil."

Cameras at the ready, the reporters file out of the room.

One of them comes up to me to ask for a comment.



“Um ..... Sora Dual Title. What do you think caused this result——?”

“Hey!”

“Ah! ..... Please excuse me.”

But bows his head in a panic when another reporter speaks up. He probably remembered my connection with Yaichi and is trying to keep some distance out of respect.

——It’d be fine with me if he asked though .....

All the local TV crews on standby in the multipurpose room upstairs are springing into action. Seriously, I can hear them all the way down here. What a ruckus.

Soon, just two people are left in the Player’s Room.

Me, along with Sota.

“You’re not going upstairs?”

“The last train is about to leave.”

Sota commutes here from his parent’s house in Nara. Last trains always leave around this time. Which means, he’s waited till the very last minute.

I pose a question to the grade schooler stuffing his things back into his backpack.

“So.”

“What’s up?”

“Why ..... why do you keep following Yaichi around? There are plenty of other players who have better winning percentages and use more software than he does .....

The answer I got was the last thing I expect to hear.

Sota puts on a friendly smile and tells me.

“Modern Shogi is just so boring!”

“Bor ..... ing?”

Hardly the words of modern Shogi’s prodigal son like Sota.

He goes into more detail looking at the confusion on my face.

“People try to give the current system an important-sounding name like *modern Shogi*, but really all this is just *reading abbreviation*. Reduce the amount of resources committed to defense by keeping your King well protected and focus those resources on attacking instead. It’s all to make a pinpoint attack.”

“.....”

“Shield yourself with thick armor and joust with a single spear. The whole world is nothing more than *I challenge you to a duel*. They call it *modern*, but their way of thinking is stuck in the feudal era.”

“B-But! Isn’t creating a situation where it’s easier to win and harder to lose all part of being a pro? Pros can’t prove they exist without winning——.”

“Yes. And as a result, the same type of Shogi keeps showing up, right? Just look at the *yagura*. All that people use nowadays are 4 Six Silver and 3 Seven Knight variants. They think they’re pursuing true Shogi theory but they’re just standardizing insignificant details.”

“Well ..... That may be so, but .....”

“Young players are researching with the top, so both high and low come to the same understanding and play the same Shogi. Both share the same values, so no revolutionary ideas ever come up. As a result, veteran players have created a system where they can maintain their place at the top. The feudal age is complete. The Meijin is the face of it all. He can play any style. However, he never comes up with a unique style of his own.”

What Sota just said is as close to taboo as a Sub League member like me can get.

But, taboos don't exist for prodigies. The one with more talent is correct in this world.

"Everyone got comfortable with the situation in the end," Sota says matter-of-factly.

Then, speaking with the confidence that being a prodigy makes him correct.

"The Shogi world rapidly changed into a hierarchical society with the *infallible* Meijin standing on top of it all. Shogi's fundamental creativity got pushed to the wayside ..... Joint practice sessions created joint hallucinations that gave players a false impression that *they* were the ones driving the change. Everyone is having the same dream. That's the same as being asleep. Boring."

"Are you saying that software is what's waking people up from that dream?"

*"Shogi played by people and Shogi played by computers are different. Software Shogi is grotesque.* It's easy to criticize software by making these claims. But in reality, the arrival of software exceeding human capabilities triggered a revolution in the Shogi world."

"....."

"That's right. The top pros are all experiencing the same hallucination. A happy dream where they have comfortable, lofty positions——."

Sota's eyes melt, almost like he's dreaming, too, as he speaks.

"But, Yaichi is different."

..... Different? Yaichi?

"How ..... so?"

"Yaichi doesn't let the board become simplistic. He doesn't try to refine the standards. In fact, he muddies them up and then rides that chaos like a surfer on waves ..... Yaichi is the only one who continuously plays the way software has shown it should be played."

Enthusiasm starts pouring out of every word.

“Isn’t it amazing? The rest of humanity didn’t discover this brand new way of thinking until it united its resources to create AI and the data showed it to them, but Yaichi was born with it.”

“.....”

So many words come to the tip of my tongue, but I stop myself each time I’m about to say something. My skin is covered in goosebumps and I can’t control it.

—Yes ..... They’re similar.

The way Yaichi leaves his King only slightly defended while doing well-balanced attacks is similar to how software plays Shogi. And, he was actually better at it back when the two of us were live-in apprentices.

For example, he used to be really good at using the Right King formation when he was little.

It was called *degenerate* and all sorts of horrible names back then, but public opinion changed when software started using it quite a bit.

Almost like ..... The software is proving the Shogi sense Yaichi was born with to be right ..... Like that’s what software was for .....

“I asked Kiyotaki-*sensei* about it, and he told me all about how Yaichi played when he was younger and ..... He was truly amazing! Prodigies like that don’t exist! He’s even more talented than the Meijin, isn’t he? In my book at the very least, Yaichi Kuzuryu is the best player in history.”

Sota’s eyes are positively gleaming.

“Modern Shogi has made Yaichi weak. He shouldn’t bother learning standards at all. He made some mistakes today, but I think that’s just because he’s become *overspecialized*.”

Overspecialized ..... one of the computer Shogi terms people are using, I think.

It's used when a program becomes so used to a certain set of circumstances that it can't deal with new information.

Sota must be saying that Yaichi researching the latest strategies and software match records made him like that, but ..... That word touched a nerve.

"Are you saying that *overspecializing* made him self-destruct?"

"Zaou-sensei developed his Shogi sense before modern Shogi became a thing. He exists outside the joint hallucination. That's why during the match today he delivered a message to Yaichi, who's dreaming along with them, saying, *That's just a dream.*"

Then, Sota adds with all the confidence in the world.

"If Yaichi had gotten rid of his modern Shogi sense and played the way he normally would, I doubt he would have lost."

"..... What do you think you know about Yaichi?"

I'm furious. So furious even I don't know how angry I am.

I get to my feet and yell at the top of my lungs.

"Yaichi ..... Yaichi isn't some software program. He's a person made of flesh and bone. He's lost more times than he can count, he's cried and worked harder than anyone else. He didn't get strong on talent alone. He's a gritty, stubborn human being with passion and fire in his veins. So, what could you possibly know about Yaichi?!"

"I know."

That's all Sota said.

But, I felt more than heard what he said next.

—More than you do, at least.

"Man, I can't wait to play Yaichi in a league match!" Slung his school backpack over his shoulder, Sota continues, "Well, I've got a train to catch.

Good night.” He flicks his head down into a short bow and leaves the room, gently closing the door behind him.

“ .....

Left alone in the Player’s Room, I ..... collapse back into my chair.

No matter how much I want to let this anger flow and set him straight on everything, my instincts as a player to calmly *read* kick in and they tell me that Sota’s analysis was right.

I’ve always been the one who knew exactly how talented Yaichi is.

—The invincible prince of the Shogi Martians ..... Yaichi’s real identity. My younger brother apprentice .....

A prodigy whose talents are special even among the Shogi Martians.

Even I can tell that Yaichi belongs to a different race, but for some reason a machine like Sota drawing the same conclusion got under my skin.

—Why .....? Why did I get so angry .....?

I space out sitting by myself, those thoughts going through my head.

Suddenly, the door to the Player’s Room slides open.

“Sota? Did you forget something?”

It’s Yaichi.

He’s pale as a ghost and his eyes aren’t focusing.

There’s something obviously very wrong with him. It looks like losing that match hit him really hard. So hard, in fact, he could fall at any moment.

“Yai——.”

“..... I blew my best chance!!”

“.....?!”

I don’t know what to say.

Reason being, Yaichi's clinging to me and bawling his eyes out.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh!!                  Ngh,                  awh                  .....

ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,

AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!

He's breaking down without caring who'll see him.

His face is buried in my knees, sitting on the floor right in front of my chair.

[illegible]

“..... It’s alright.”

I gently hold Yaichi's weeping head between my knees and hands.

Softly running my fingers through his hair, I quietly whisper into his ear.

“It’s okay. It’s okay to lose. It’s okay to get a little stuck ..... You’ll promote before you know it, Yaichi. You’re a lock for the A division ..... You’ll be Meijin .....”

That's when it finally hits me.

—I'm ..... happy about this.

Yes. I am happy. Happy that Yaichi got stuck in C-2. Happy that he won't be leaving me where I am. Now that I'm in the 3-*dan* division, he won't be leaving me behind.

I just didn't want to admit it. That's why I got so angry listening to Sota.

Because he pointed out how different Yaichi and I are. Even though he's waiting for me .....

But.

—A year or two won't be enough .....

Far from it. Yaichi is already in a place I could never reach in a thousand years.

— ..... So far away. Hard to believe he's in my arms right now.

Yaichi sobbing like he used to back in the days when he called me *Ginko-chan*, I embrace him with so many heart-wrenching thoughts running through me that my chest feels like it's going to burst.

Sota could be right about modern Shogi being some kind of joint hallucination.

If it's true, I want to see the same dream.

Even if ..... it is a boring hallucination.



## PLACEMENT

“Yaichi ..... Yaichi.”

I can hear the restraint in Big Sis’s voice as she pats my head in her lap while I wallow in misery.

“Hey, Yaichi ..... Yaichi, can you hear me?”

“Haaa .....?”

“Why don’t you check Kanto’s results?”

“..... I don’t have to look to know what happened.”

“But something strange might’ve happened? Maybe ..... something like you and Zaou-*sensei* happened over there, too.”

“Too scary. You look, Ginko-chan.”

“I can’t do that. You know that, right?”

Big Sis shakes her head back and forth like I’m putting her in a tight spot as she gently wipes away all the snot and tears on my face with a handkerchief.

She may have calmed me down enough to stop crying and get up, but ..... I just don’t want to look at those results .....

That’s the moment when.

“Master!!”

Ai Hinatsuru bursts into the Player’s Room with all the excitement of the puppy seeing snow for the first time.

She isn’t alone.

Mio, Ayano and Charlette race in after her. The whole Grade Schooler Practice Group being here so late at night is so bizarre. They should all be

waiting back in my apartment.

What could possibly have happened for them to be here——?

“Congratulations on your promotion!!”

... says everyone looking right at me.

“..... Come again?”

Pro ..... motion?

Whose?

“I’m so ..... so glad! I, after your match ..... I was crying, giving up hope ..... But it’s so true that you should never give up until the very last moment!”

Trails of dried tears are still on her cheeks as she smiles up at me even though I have no idea what’s going on. She keeps on talking, absolutely overflowing with glee.

“Once we saw your come-from-behind promotion ..... We just couldn’t wait at home, so we came to see you! Sorry it’s so late at night! But, but, we just couldn’t stay still .....!!”

Mio, Ayano and Charlette all join hands with her in a circle and dance around me like it’s my birthday or something, each smiling from ear to ear.

“I thought we’d be doing a cheer-up party when you lost, Kuzunu-sensei, but who would’ve thought there’d be a Two Pawn violation in a match in Kanto?!”

“It’s truly surprising no one knows what will really happen! He was just one move away from victory, but to play a Two Pawn like that ..... The phrase—*The moment victory is assured is the most dangerous*—has never felt so true!”

“You know? Cha, you know? Cha Two Pwaed, too?”

“Don’t do that yourself!”

“Two pwa, two pwa♪”

Opposed to the girls having the time of their lives ..... I’m numb, like all the emotion got sucked out of me.

I drift and stumble my way toward the Player’s Room lockers to get my phone and check the results for myself.

“..... It’s true .....”

There’s a picture of Hatomachi 5-*dan* in some serious pain after accidentally deploying a Pawn in a column where he already had one, Two Pawn on the very last move right here on the official blog. He was the undefeated player ranked below me .....

And another player with one loss, Iuchi 6-*dan*, lost too.

Players neck and neck with me in a race to the finish line tripped on the home stretch. Two of them .....

Then letters spelling out—Thus Kansai’s Yaichi Kuzuryu has been granted C-2’s final promotion slot—are at the bottom of the page.

—Then ..... I really did promote to C-1 .....?

I fall from heaven into hell in one moment and then get dragged back up to heaven in the next ..... Still not sure if this is real, I notice Mio pulling on my sleeve as she says, “See?! You’re promoted!!”

“Masta, pwyaty time?”

“She’s right, Master! The food will get cold if we don’t hurry ..... Ah, but you have interviews to do, right?”

Glancing at all the journalists with notepads in hand and cameras at the ready standing outside the Player’s Room, Ai trails off and tilts her head to the side. But—.

“..... Girls. Do you realize what you’ve just done?”

Big Sis and those very journalists are staring back at the Grade Schooler Practice Group with a very cold look in their eyes.

Big Sis explains why.

“Only the players directly involved with promotions or demotions can talk about it in the Shogi world. So long as Yaichi doesn’t directly ask, no one is allowed to say a word.”

It’s one of the Shogi world’s unwritten laws.

In the event that someone gets promoted by *default* like I just did—basically getting promoted based on other match results, there are times it can happen before that player’s match is over.

If they find out during the match, then it’ll affect how they play no matter what.

If the results of that match go on to influence other matches ..... That domino effect could keep spreading and end up changing history itself.

Changing history might be exaggerating it.

But, it’s a guarantee that somebody’s Shogi life will be affected way too much.

That’s why everyone is extra cautious to make sure placement news doesn’t reach the ears of anyone directly involved.

“Huh .....?”

Ai looks around, surprised.

“I ..... shouldn’t have said ..... it .....?”

Big Sis’s glare hasn’t softened at all as she stares down my apprentice.

When she realized that even Machi Kugui (a.k.a. the journalist known as Mato) watching all this from outside the room wasn’t denying it, Ai went blue in

the face.

“*Gasp!* Ngh ..... S-Sor ..... I’m sor-ry, Master .....! I-I was! ... J-just so happy ..... And I ..... And I .....!”

“..... Nah, it’s fine. I would’ve found out anyway sooner or later ..... Promotion news gets around real quick in the Shogi world these days, so it was just a matter of time .....”

My apprentice is fighting off tears and apologizing profusely.

Gently patting her little head, I force my lips into a smile.

“And, I’ve got to say that there’s no better way to learn about my first professional promotion than directly from my cute apprentice!”

“M-Master ..... I’m so, so soooooorry!!”

Pretty much crying at this point, Ai wraps her arms around my waist, buries her face in my side and keeps saying, “I’m sorry!” and “Congratulations!” at a 70/30 ratio.

Mio and Ayano follow suit, saying, “Sorry!” and “I apologize!” with tears leaking out of their eyes as they come in for a hug.

Charlette, not understanding what’s going on, tilts her head with her “Oh?” and puts her arms around me, too.

Right in the middle of their soft embrace, I gently pat them all on the head or on the back.

“..... Spoiling them again?” says a clearly agitated Big Sis through puckered up lips.

“I wouldn’t say I’m spoiling them ..... I mean, this is my fault because I, the Master, didn’t teach them well enough——.”

“Shut up, lolicon. Go home and have your little girls party. Get out of here and start up the lolicon convention in your own room, will you? You’ve got all these

types of little girls to enjoy one after the other until the sun comes up, yes?”

“What lolicon convention?! And, it was never a *little girls party*, but a party *with little girls*! Journalists are right there! Please stop saying things that will give them the wrong idea!”

“..... Spending the night with little girls by itself is enough to do that if you ask me .....,” says Ms. Mato, pulling out her voice recorder with a big smile on her face as she pointed it at me. Other journalists are doing the same thing.

“Kuzuryu-sensei, may I ask for a comment on how you feel now that you know about your promotion?”

“That’s hard to answer ....., So much has happened so quickly that, honestly, it doesn’t feel real .....,”

I make eye contact with Big Sis and Ai, jerking my head to tell them: *go on ahead*.

Once they were all out of the room, I ditch a smile I put on to reassure the girls and continue with the interview.

“If you’re asking whether I’m happy or sad, I’d say that not winning my way into C-1 hurts more. My Shogi was horrible today.”

“Advancing out of C-2 in only your second season as a professional is an impressive achievement in my opinion .....,”

“Maybe a little too impressive considering my skill level.”

I nodded, my face twisting with the irony.

“But, as a title holder—as the Ryuo, I feel that I should promote with a flawless record. At the very least, promoting by default is pathetic, too pathetic.”

“Does that expectation carry over to next season?”

“So long as I have a title, I think it’s my duty to promote on my own power.

Does that answer your question?”

I pull on my coat the moment I finish answering her.

“Ah! Kuzuryu-sensei!”

Ms. Mato pulls the sheet of paper out of her bag just as I was about to head out the door.

“A Shogi magazine asked me to get *Joyous Promotional Comments* for the next issue. I wouldn’t need it for a couple days, but may I ask you to write something?”

“..... I’m too ashamed to write anything. Please send it in blank,” I say sharply and make sure to get out the door this time without hesitating.

Big Sis and the girls are waiting for me.

## THE CALL

The call came in the middle of the night.

“Father. You have your own Placement Match tomorrow, so why not go to bed?”

“Yeah .....

He and I have been sitting facing each other at the kitchen table repeating this conversation over and over for hours now. I boiled some water for him to drink when we first walked into the kitchen, but it’s room temperature at this point.

C-2’s Placement Match finale is today.

Yaichi took an unexpected loss at the hands of Zaou-*sensei*.

Ranked as low as he is, Yaichi’s chance to promote based on his record alone is gone. Whether he promotes or not all comes down to Kanto’s match results. And those should still be going on.

I say *should* because neither Father nor I have checked the blogs.

We could pull them up in an instant on our phones, but ..... So many complicated feelings are getting in the way that neither of us can go through with it.

So, that’s why we’re sitting here in the kitchen doing absolutely nothing while waiting for a phone call that might not come at all.

However, it’s time we finished doing that, too.

“If you’re worried about it, I’ll stay awake——.”

Father’s smartphone vibrates before I could finish that sentence.

“!Yeah? It’s me.”

He presses the *accept* button on the first ring and is clearly nervous about



talking to whoever is on the other end of the line.

“Ahh. Yar fine. No big deal.”

His voice is slow and steady to hide his nerves.

“Uh-huh ..... Yeah. I see. Congrats!”

The call was over quickly.

It was maybe two minutes long. After waiting for hours, the fact that it didn't last longer must mean that both sides understood the situation and saying anymore would've been awkward.

“Yaichi?”

“Yeah.”

He promoted, didn't he? I thought about it, but didn't ask. If he called at all, it's obvious what he was going to say. And, when the call finally came, I realized I didn't want to hear it.

As much as it pains me to admit, I was disappointed but relieved when Yaichi lost today.

Seriously, Yaichi has so much already.

I like him as a person, I love him like a little brother and I genuinely want him to be happy.

But I'm jealous. That's what's going on.

Although it may not be morally correct as a human being, I firmly believe that as an active Shogi player it's not wrong. There is no moving up in this world without harnessing that black flame.

Considering it's this hard processing things for me, Father must have it even worse.

Much less, Father will fight ..... in a Placement Match to determine his rank tomorrow.

If he hasn't had a change of heart, it could determine whether he retires from Shogi altogether.

—To make matters worse, his opponent is Yaichi's .....

I was anxious to see what kind of effect the call would have on him.

"Keika."

"Yes?"

"Would ya get out my kimono?"

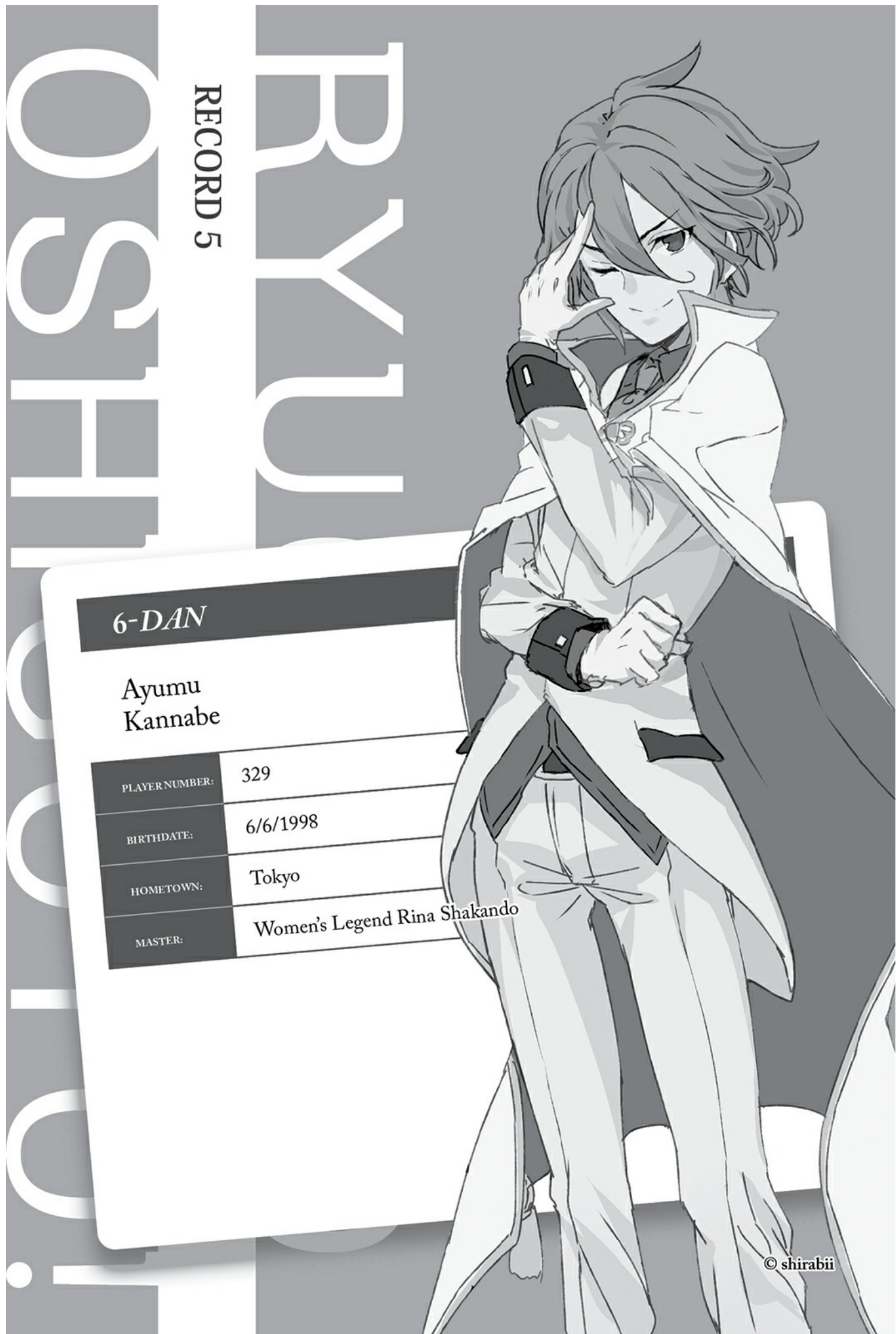
"! ..... Sure."

I'm a little relieved.

There's a fire burning in Father's heart.

I don't know if the flames are bright or dark, but there's a fire.





RECORD 5

6-DAN

Ayumu  
Kannabe

|                |                              |
|----------------|------------------------------|
| PLAYER NUMBER: | 329                          |
| BIRTHDATE:     | 6/6/1998                     |
| HOMETOWN:      | Tokyo                        |
| MASTER:        | Women's Legend Rina Shakando |

## B-2 DIVISION FINAL MATCH

“Well, I’ll be goin’,” a fully dressed and prepared Kousuke Kiyotaki said to his daughter. Just like always.

The only difference today was the extra bag in his arms. It held the kimono he was planning to wear for today’s match.

“Sorry to ask ya to get it ready outta the blue like that.”

“It’s fine. Compared to all the other things you’ve asked me to do recently, Father, this was nothing.”

“Ya may have a point there.”

Father and daughter shared a laugh.

“..... I’ll be comin’ straight home tonight no matter what ends up happenin’. Could be pretty late, though, so go ahead and hit the sack.”

“It’s okay. I’ll stay up and wait for you.”

*I could never get to sleep without knowing the results .....* Keika thought but didn’t let the words escape her throat.

There were so many things she wanted to ask.

—Are you serious about retiring if you get demoted? Can you survive without Shogi in your life?

—Why are you saying you want to quit right when we finally became a true family?

—Have I ..... been supportive enough as your daughter?

However, Keika kept all those questions locked away.

Instead, she yelled out to her father as the man walked down the street away from her.

“Don’t give up!! Don’t give up, Father!!”

Kousuke didn’t turn around but waved his hand high over his head in response.

Kousuke changed into his kimono upon arriving at the association and stepped into the Onjyoudan no Ma 30 minutes before the match was scheduled to begin.

Sub League members were still hard at work making preparations inside the arena.

“Mornin’. Mind if I take over?”

“Huh?”

If the appearance of a man in a full kimono wasn’t startling enough, Kousuke’s request to *take over* had them completely bewildered.

Reason being, they had just started cleaning the board for the match.

“..... Sure, here .....”

“Thanks.” Taking a cloth from one of them, “Haaa ..... Alright!”

Kousuke sat down on his ankles, straightened his posture and wholeheartedly committed himself to wiping the board spotless.

His kimono’s fabric was thick and heavy.

His brow shone with sweat in mere moments, but Kousuke didn’t let up. Each swipe across the board was just as strong as the last.

Though he had worn traditional Japanese clothing as a match observer many times over the past few years, never once had he done so as a player. Kousuke continued meticulously cleaning the board to remind himself how it felt to be in battle. Strength in each and every muscle.

—— ..... Demoted on the spot with a loss ..... Talk about high stakes .....

He tempered his heart like steel.

Each stroke across the board fell like a hammer, driving the blemishes out of his fighting spirit.

—It's all outta hand ..... I'll fall when I fall, no matter what I do .....

Kousuke tore those thoughts away with every swipe of the cloth.

He worked his spirit down to the point where only a pure desire for a good battle remained.

“Yeah ..... That's got it.”

Looking at his own reflection on the shimmering Shogi board, Kousuke's heart and mind were crystal clear.

At long last, other players started entering the arena.

A total of eight matches were to take place in Kanto today. In Kansai, five.

Of those five, Kousuke's match would surely draw the spotlight. Partly because rankings were on the line ..... but his opponent would be the main attraction.

The B-2 Division final Placement Match.

His opponent had been determined the moment this season's Placement Matches had been announced ..... more than nine months prior.

Kousuke had been overtaken by a mixture of complicated emotions when the schedule was revealed.

He was very familiar with his opponent and had known him for years.

At the same time, it wasn't someone from his generation like Hiroshi Muroga.

He was from a much younger generation ..... One younger than his own daughter. He had even done instructional matches against this opponent, giving him handicaps in the past.

“Can I give it all I’ve got, knowin’ I’m facin’ *him*? Or——.”

The room suddenly tensed.

The few conversations happening vanished as a sense of prickly unease gripped the arena like an electric shock.

A unique aura only donned by those who command *trust* in the Shogi world—those unanimously recognized as strong.

“..... He’s here, eh?”

Today’s opponent.

Recognizing his adversary, Kousuke ..... felt the flame in his chest burn even brighter.





Meijin Apparent—Ayumu Kannabe 6-*dan*.

“Beg your pardon.”

Flipping his trademark white cape over his shoulder, the young man gallantly strode to the lower seat.

The sight of Kousuke’s kimono did nothing to break his usual, even-keeled aura.

— ..... Cool as a cucumber, that one.

Even though the people of Kansai had grown to expect Ayumu’s unusual fashion sense, it made an even greater impact.

Which was strange because it made wearing a kimono to the final Placement Match seem like par for the course by comparison. Kousuke felt he’d already lost a battle before the war got underway.

—I gotta admit ..... Never thought such a quiet kid would turn out like this .....  
.....

As his apprentice Yaichi’s closest friend, Ayumu had spent many nights playing Shogi at the Kiyotaki household in his youth.

The Ayumu of those days kept to himself and was rather shy. Kousuke still saw him as a reserved boy.

—But, his Shogi was always solid. Attack or defense, it didn’t matter. He always stayed straight and true.

He played like a king.

Ayumu’s talent was impossible to miss even when playing against him and his apprentice on two boards simultaneously. What’s more, Kousuke felt the boy’s willpower might even exceed Yaichi’s.

He was sure Ayumu would grow strong.

Strong enough to challenge him one day.

But, never this soon and in such a consequential match like this one ..... Kousuke marveled at the Shogi gods' whimsical nature as he lined up the pieces.

"It is time. Kannabe-*sensei*, the opening move is yours."

The match recorder was a young man who frequented the Kiyotaki Classroom.

He was also the *kyu*-ranking Sub League member for whom Kousuke had once been forced to give up his seat in the Player's Room.

Now, the two were allies diligently committed to reaching the same goal.

Apparently, the young man had taken a page out of Hiuma Kagamizu's book and refused a floor cushion for this long endeavor. Kousuke felt a small rush of courage well up within him at the sight.

That courage became the fuel that drove him forward to meet Ayumu head on in a Double Yagura match.

Both combatants were particularly skilled with *yagura* castles.

Ayumu's formation was the epitome of modern Shogi, seamlessly combining "strong defense, aggressive attack and an unbreakable line."

Meanwhile, Kousuke had constructed a thick *yagura*, one designed to absorb punishment.

Each player executed their individual styles with enough precision to be called *textbook Shogi*.

The match followed their specialties to the letter with Ayumu on the offensive and Kousuke matching him blow for blow as the two fought neck and neck—However.

"Now .....!!"

66th move.

Kousuke sent his Knight into the fray. The piece came down with a confident snap, filling the whole arena with the sound of assured victory.

The sense that told him to calmly send his Knight toward the center of the board was the direct result of working with young Shogi players like Sota Kunugi and other Sub League members.

“?!”

This timing caught Ayumu off guard.

His fingers, which had been flying across the board at a breakneck speed up until this point, came to a standstill as he sunk a great deal of waiting into planning his next move.

“.....? .....!!”

Through taking several minutes, Ayumu came to the realization that Kousuke’s Knight jumping forward had tipped the scales against him.

“Tsk .....!”

Pounding his fists into his own thighs to vent frustration, he sent a Silver forward to neutralize the new threat posed to his front line.

—Let youth shine through!!

Kousuke’s fingertips pulsed with new life as he fought to extend his lead. His playing style transformed into a free-flowing, almost nimble front as opposed to his classic ironclad defense.

This sequence, painstakingly acquired from weeks of researching with software that he himself had difficulty learning how to use, had forced Ayumu into a defensive position despite starting the match on offense.

Kousuke’s adept use of his Bishop allowed him to trample his opponent’s offensive formation with Promoted Pawns and drive Ayumu’s Rook into retreat.

This new *borrowed* clothing was now as comfortable as his own skin and Kousuke utilized it to the fullest.

“Alright ..... Alright. That’s goin’ my way .....”

He spoke aloud, reassured by his advantage.

The very fact that the saying *having more pieces leads to victory* exists in the Shogi world shows that no matter how Shogi senses change, the value of pieces themselves stays the same. It’s become a good luck charm of sorts.

—Makes a geezer like me feel like he can take on the world!

The formations clearly showed Kousuke held the advantage.

Claiming this position in the early game against one of Kanto’s most prominent young players, on defense no less, was a magnificent accomplishment.

“Kh ..... ’Tis inevitable!!”

An invigorated Ayumu deployed a Silver directly in front of Kousuke’s formation.

It was nothing more than a forced offensive, a knee-jerk reaction to knowing that he would be overrun without taking drastic measures. Rather than a logical strategy, Ayumu’s competitive drive was behind this attack ..... That’s how Kousuke read the situation.

—Tradin’ a Silver for a Gold? Seems a bit .....

Losing a defensive Gold would certainly hurt, but when he took his current advantage into account, Kousuke reasoned he could methodically break down his opponent’s assault and claim victory.

Therefore, he went ahead with the exchange.

That was a mistake.

Ayumu immediately deployed his newly claimed Gold directly in front of

Kousuke's Bishop.

“Agh?!”

Kousuke literally jumped out of his cushion in that moment.

His Bishop was cornered.

“W-What've I ..... Spacin' out like that .....”

He couldn't believe it himself.

“Got so caught up with the Knight ..... Completely forgot about the Bishop .....!”

—I'm officially over the hill.

His heart knew it to be true.

Then, Ayumu simply placed the Bishop he claimed for free on his piece stand. The piece was pinched between his white-gloved fingers.

Kousuke saw it like the young man had his very life in his grasp.

## OVERSIGHT

Now that party last night really pushed the limits.

If I had to write anything about the party that went down at my apartment last night with those girls celebrating my promotion until the sun came up, that would be it.

Considering that most of the attendees were grade schoolers, not even old enough to be considered *minors*, there was no alcohol to be had at the party. Then again, we didn't need it. The sweet, sweet taste of victory was a better buzz than any drink could give.

Yes, the liquor called *promotion*.

"Congratulations≡ Kuzuryu-sensei≡≡≡"

I happily munched on the delicious desserts my apprentice made just for me while all the other grade schoolers showered me with praise.

Four spoons, one from each direction, came up to my face, all accompanied with the cutest little, "Say ah!" you could imagine. Hey, now, I can only eat one at a time!

"You know, Cha? To celebuate? Cha's gwoing to marry Masta!"

"Ah! No fair, Charlette! I wanna marry Guzuryu-sensei, too!"

"I-I as well ..... Kuzuryu-sensei, please take me as your bride!!"

"No, no, no!! The first apprentice gets to marry Master! Because, I am first!!"

"Don't worry, everybody. I'm in C-1 now, so I can take as many wives as I want."

"Woow!!"

It's only natural. I'm not one of the bottom feeders in C-2. I'm in C-1.

C-1 players have a higher salary and 17-year-olds can get married, so of course I can marry as many girls as I want.

“Watch it, Yaichi! Marrying multiple grade school girls at once, how can you be so stupid?! You’ll be arrested this time for sure!!”

“Oh? Are you saying you want to be married to this C-1 player as well, Big Sis?”

“Huuuh? As if! Would you get off that high horse until you’re in A?”

“..... What’s so good about A? That’s your cup size, right .....?”

“Your head on a pike.”

“Watch your mouth, Big Sis. Don’t forget, you’re talking to a C-1 player now.”

“?!”

Once I handily dodged her fist, Big Sis blushed red and started fiddling with her hair.

“Heh heh heh ..... You can deny it, but your body knows what it wants. Ginko-chan .....”

“Ngh .....! Kill me .....!!” (*Shudder!*)

Even *the* Ginko Sora couldn’t resist a C-1 player. Damn, I’m glad I promoted.

Is the dream I had.

In reality, there wasn’t a party at all. We just came back to my apartment for a quick *congrats* and called it a night. Ayano’s parents drove here all the way from Kyoto to pick her up and took Charlette with them and I called a taxi for Mio because she lives pretty close. After all, they’ve got school tomorrow.

Ai Hinatsuru and Big Sis were the ones who stayed.



It just felt weird celebrating when I lost but got promoted by default.

We nibbled on cold food, took turns taking baths and went to bed straightaway.

Ai went to school this morning and I'm pretty sure Big Sis went right to the association.

I was so tired that I slept into the evening and only now woke up.

"..... I wish I were dead ....."

I groan, remembering just how lolicon-esque the dream I had was and the agony of defeat all at once. C-1 players taking as many wives as they want, what the hell .....? What am I, nuts .....

Feeling guiltier than any words could ever describe, I take a look at my smartphone and see Ai Yashajin sent a message to congratulate me.

"What a sorry way to promote. Well, it's about perfect for you, right *Sensei*? Congratulations."

"..... Someone, kill me ....."

That message from my apprentice smashes my spirit to smithereens.

The thing is that this is probably what most people in the Shogi world are thinking right now.

All the *trust* I built up on my winning streak has plummeted back down to zero after losing yesterday.

"..... I just had to say the *yagura is dead* and then get totally destroyed using one of them ....."

It's not just the trust.

My confidence is beaten to a pulp.

"I was doing so well only to have some 80-year-old fossil one match away from retirement mess it all up ....."

Of course, I get it.

I get that underestimating Zaou-sensei lead to losing.

I get that my lack of respect for decades of Shogi experience caused my downfall.

But, even if the logic checks out ..... The pain of losing destroys that logic, crushes it into nothingness. Promoting doesn't make that pain go away and marrying Charlette won't do a thing about it, either.

"If researching like my life depended on it didn't work ..... Then what kind of Shogi am I supposed to play .....?"

It hurts so bad I can't even look at a Shogi board.

I'm so ashamed, I don't want to go to the association.

But——.

"Here I am anyway ....."

I step up to the association's front door and hesitate for a moment.

My Master has a match today.

The B-2 division final ..... and it could be his last pro match if he gets demoted.

If that happens, today could be Master's last league match.

The last thing I want to do when I feel like utter garbage is watch an important match like that.

But.

"..... I have to see this one through."

Sighing from the bottom of my lungs, I make myself as small as possible to avoid embarrassment and sneak my way into the association.

Then, I could tell something was off by the heavy vibe in the Player's Room

the second I step inside.

Big Sis, Mr. Kagamizu and Sota are all hunched over a board and look like they just pulled an all-nighter. There is no doubt in my mind that Master's match is being analyzed on that board.

"Big Sis? Did something big happen in Master's match?"

"His Bishop got taken for nothing."

"For reals?"

Is that for real? I wanted to ask, but several sounds get stuck in my throat.

"Do major pieces ever get taken ..... for free in pro matches?"

Ms. Mato, busily typing up a live blog entry on her computer in the corner, provides the answer.

"It happened once earlier this year. Though, it was a veteran freelance player."

"How did it turn out?"

"He surrendered on the spot."

Well, I don't blame him for throwing in the towel .....

"Yaichi! Yaichi! Yaichi!"

Sota runs up to me with his phone in hand once he notices I'm in the room.

"I booted up the monster machine upstairs in Kiyotaki-*sensei's* house and I've got it remotely analyzing everything. See? I've got it all connected to my phone and I can control it from here——."

He tells me with his fingers running back and forth across the screen.

"The rating right now is minus 1500. Offense has a major advantage."

In general, turning the tables is impossible once software gives one side 1000 points over the other.

Being another 500 points beyond that makes his chances ..... Well, this match is as good as over.

It doesn't help that he is playing against Ayumu. Talk about hopeless.

"Kiyotaki-*sensei* ..... He's good, but giving up a Bishop for free ....."

Mr. Kagamizu's eyes trace the analysis board, his face twisting in agony.

I start reading the board right alongside them.

"....."

After some thought, I come up with a different conclusion. In desperation.

"Depending on how you think about it, Ayumu putting that Gold there pretty much takes it out of the match. The formation ..... might not be that bad."

"He has a chance? Still ....."

Big Sis is still clinging to hope.

Nobody, however, was able to answer her.

Ai Hinatsuru burst into the Kiyotaki household with her school backpack still strapped to her shoulders.

"Keika! Keeeikaaaaaaa!!"

Ai was the type of girl who would always neatly line up her shoes next to the door when she came inside, but today she let them be after prying them off her feet. Her small arms were cradling a tablet against her chest.

She couldn't remember a single thing from any of her classes at school today.

Her attention had been squarely focused on the tablet beneath her desk, tracking the match blog during class and recess alike.

Then, she raced here the moment school let out.

"Keika, where are you?! Grandpa-*sensei*'s match is falling apart ..... Keika?!"

Where are you?!”

Keika was in the kitchen.

Unable to watch the most crucial match of her father’s career, she busied herself with the dishes instead.

“Keika! Look, look at this! Grandpa-*sensei*’s match, he’s——.”

“Not another word!!” Keika shrieked, standing with her back to the girl.

Though surprised by that reaction, Ai cautiously pressed her point even further.

“B-But ..... Grandpa-*sensei* ... he’s trying so hard. He’s fighting and fighting ..... so why aren’t you watching him?”

“Because I already know ..... I know exactly how hard he’s trying, more than anyone else. No one needs to tell me that .....”

Keika’s voice was strained as if each word had to be squeezed out.

“Do you know why he drinks so much after his matches? It’s because he’s ground his molars so hard that his jaw hurts and chewing solid food is too painful ..... Gritting his teeth is how he endures pressure, and he’s done that so much that most of the enamel on his molars is gone ..... The dentist told him dentures aren’t an option because he doesn’t have back teeth anymore .....”

“.....! That’s horrible .....”

Ai was at a loss for words.

“Fighting with your eyes looking up is the best feeling in the world ..... But Father and I, we have to fight with our eyes down ..... No hopes, no dreams ..... Simply fighting to stay alive .....”

“.....”

“Can you understand what that’s like? How hard it is to play in such wretched conditions, how pathetic it feels .....? Then again, how can I expect people like

you and Yaichi who expect to win to know what that's like .....!"

Jealousy starting to take hold, Keika plugged her ears with her hands and yelled, "So, please! Don't say anything! Put that tablet away!!"

"Kei ..... ka ....."

Unsure of how to approach the young woman clamping her ears shut, Ai stood bewildered in the kitchen doorway with her tablet still clenched in her arms.

## AWAKEN! GEEZER STYLE

I thought about raisin' the white flag the moment my Bishop got snatched.

“..... Haaaa .....”

The youngens that I built up, that I watched grow are now passin' me by.

Especially the ones I put my heart and soul into raisin' don't show me a lick of mercy anymore. Regret bites at me every time I see one of them do somethin' I taught them.

Like Ayumu here, claspin' his pants just above the right knee ..... Seeing him still rememberin' to do what I taught him some ten years ago nearly makes my heart snap in two.

—A youngen like that ain't gonna have no weak spots .....

But, I got through it.

It was knowin' the Sub League member sittin' on his ankles directly on the *tatami* is watchin' me play that helped me get my head on straight.

Seein' him stick with it, fightin' tooth and nail reminded me of all those youngens who played along with me at the Kiyotaki Classroom.

I have to keep goin', for everybody that helped me research for this match and everybody who's always been there supportin' me.

There is another reason, too.

Somethin' I want to try before givin' up.

Somethin' I heard about in Hozenji Yokocho after my L-B matched finished up  
.....

“..... Ever heard of Flavor of Kyoto, Taste of Naniwa?”

“?”

Ayumu's eyes glance up for a second but look back to the board just as quick. He's probably thinkin' it's just an old geezer talkin' to himself.

Yep. I'm a geezer.

Sure, I'm usin' software, wearin' hip-hop swag along with the kiddos and lettin' my youth shine through. But, at the end of the day, a geezer's a geezer.

No matter how many of their words I try to use or how many of these messenger apps I download, I'm just the butt of the *with-it* kiddos' jokes.

If there's one thing I've learned from spendin' time with the youngens, it's this.

Geezers can't turn back the clock no matter what.

—Players feelin' their skills slip away can choose one of two paths .....

The first, go to the youngens to learn the latest strategies.

The other, hide yar age and go down with yar best strategy.

Unfortunately, geezers can't cram information into their heads like the kiddos can, and people'll figure out they're over the hill sooner or later.

Geezers are doomed to fail no matter which path they choose.

That's why I think I'm gonna try walkin' right between the two.

Rather than keep drawin' the same old weapon I always have, I'm gonna give it some new edges and keep on swingin'!

"Now that is—Geezer style!!"

—Point, geezers don't give a darn 'bout who's got more pieces.

"As far as skill goes, I was already down a Bishop! Ya can go ahead and have it!!"



I get off my cushion, fling it off into the corner of the arena, and set my knees down on the *tatami* mats to get back into fightin' mode.

Everythin' a geezer says comes with contradictions, just like *havin' more pieces leads ya to victory*. Kinda like that boss that keeps changin' his mind, geezers change up their playin' styles whenever they feel like it. If there's one thing us old guys are good at, it's puttin' kiddos in tough spots.

"One, two, three, four. Four Pawns ..... eh."

First, I get an idea of what's on my piece stand and what I can do with them.

Then, I give my opponent a full servin' of Pawns right to the King's face, *snap, snap, snap, snap*!!

"Kaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

".....?!"

Seems my Pawn parade's got Ayumu guessin'.

Geezers barely had spare change to work with growin' up, so geezers know how to get the most outta their minor pieces. Youngens who grew up with convenience stores could never walk into an old candy shop with 100 yen and walk out with a basket full of goodies like we figured out how to do. Bein' thrifty is what geezers do best.

"Hangin' in there? Had enough of the muddy, gritty back and forth? Hm?" I say lookin' up at him.

'Course he's ignorin' me, but geezers are used to gettin' ignored by the young folks. No damage whatsoever.

Now that I'm older, I get to do to the youngens everything I hated the vets doin' to me back in the day.

"It's (the one) fun thing about bein' a geezer!"

— Point, geezers should get up in the youngens' business.

And also not forget to sneak in a few pieces around their King in the meantime.

Geezers look like they don't care about nothin', but are really pretty sensitive. They have to fight back the jitters just pressin' the send button on a message to a fine lady they happened to meet or even their own daughter .....

Next up, I start movin' pieces left and right.

It's a tactic to keep the other guy from focusin' on just one spot. Doin' this'll make it harder for the youngens to use their best weapon, readin' deep. Geezers have a boatload of experience failin' in all sorts of ways. Can't count how many times I messed up havin' this done to me .....

".....!!"

Ayumu's line of sight keeps goin' back to the right side of the board.

That's right, ya keep lookin' over there.

Perk up those ears while yer at it.

"....."

The kid's usin' all his senses, everythin' he's got to figure out what I'm after.

The song I requested is finally startin' to play.

A *nyugyoku* march—the openin' stanza.

"So, now, now. Time to get movin'?"

I send in more Pawns from my piece stand and start promotin' them into Golds one by one.

Crows and geezers both like shiny stuff. 'Course that ain't the only reason I'm upgradin' the Pawns, just sayin' we can relate.

*Double nyugyoku* and *draw*—basically a stalemate when both Kings reach the other side of the board.

Force a draw like that and ya get a rematch with offense and defense switchin' sides.

Thinkin' about it in Ayumu's shoes, he'd be losin' this massive lead he's got on me and should do everythin' he can to avoid a draw. Meanin', he's got to get rid of those Promoted Pawns I scattered around the board.

"Kh ..... Blasted Sub-Golds!!"

Sub-Gold? Ah, the *golden* Promoted Pawns, maybe?

The lingo kiddos use these days is too far-fetched for geezers like me to get ..... Ayumu's real hot under the collar, though. That much I do get.

"Good, good ....."

If there's one thing geezers are good at, it's irritatin' the youngens by gettin' up in their faces. My never-say-die, stubborn as all hell playin' style has muddied up Kanto's bright young star's latest strategies.

—Now feels about right .....

Computer-*sensei* can't figure out the really sensitive timin' like this one.

Somethin' tells me the software ratin' is lookin' pretty lopsided against me right about now ..... But software can't calculate what's happenin' in Ayumu's head, now can it?

"Nn-gahh!!"

After pilin' more Pawns into his territory, I smack one down right behind a Gold defendin' my King.

"Low Sub .....?!"

More weird words pour outta Ayumu's mouth in surprise.

Can't blame him though.

No doubt he's caught the scent of a *nyugyoku* and a possible draw by now, but playin' a Pawn there'd be for holdin' my ground and bracin' for a fight.

His spirit's got to be shakin' as much as his eyes right about now.

Ayumu's hit peak confusion.

Which, in turn, made him do this.

161st move—6 Six Gold. He completely wasted his move.

“What have I done?!!”

It hits him right when he takes his hand away.

Then, he starts poundin' his fists into his legs, tryin' to vent frustration.

This'll be bitin' him for a while. Skilled as he is, Ayumu's insistence on perfection won't let him forgive himself for messin' up.

“Ah, youth .....

On the other side of the coin, geezers forget standards and even their own matches against different strategies all the time. The silver linin' is that we also forget our mistakes. Bein' behind by a Bishop is long gone (in my head, anyway).

Now it's time for me to do somethin' about these pieces comin' at me.

I take the Promoted Lance Ayumu set up as a stagin' ground to *nyugyoku* and, presto, formations are equal again!

“Hehehe .....

Flauntin' the Lance I just took, I smack it down and say, “Ya know what's perfect for flat formations like this .....? A nice, sharp skewer .....

Ayumu ignores my musin'.

But, with his attention on that Lance, his King should start headin' for the hills.

—'Cause he'd lose if I came for him head on .....

So, he goes into his bag of tricks to pull out all the smoke and mirrors he can find to keep that from happenin'. Geezers can't win the fast battles because our reflexes ain't what they used to be. Frankly speakin', it's scary.

But, ya know? Geezers ain't just gonna give up.

It all makes sense now.

All that chit-chattin' the vets did to ease their nerves was also a darn good tactic.

Usin' their influence to change up the rules was cheap, but now I understand the strength it takes to be willin' to go that far.

They were desperate for a win, desperate enough to sacrifice their own pride for an edge in battle. All to keep on livin' as a player ..... So they'd have at least one more match of Shogi to play, the game they loved.

I think that's pretty cool.

Right now, I think so with all my heart. Geezers are pretty darn cool.

Ayumu Kannabe is a good kid. I ain't got nothin' against him personally.

He and Yaichi'll be the ones carryin' on the Shogi world's torch for a long time comin'.

'Course he'll promote.

Truth be told, I'd love for him to rise all the way up to A with a perfect record in the Placement Matches, a fittin' and glorious entrance for the Meijin Apparent to have in title matches.

Most likely, the Shogi world's feelin' that way, too.

"But, I ain't takin' it layin' down! I'm fighin' destiny!"

Why would I? ——'Cause that's the epitome of geezer style!!

I smack down my next piece, my inner competitor dead set on makin' that epitome a reality. Other people in the arena flinch at how loud that was, but I couldn't care less.

Ya know why——?

"I'm a geezer ..... And geezers can't read between the lines worth a damn!!"

## LOW PAWN

“Low Pawn?!”

Everyone is staring at the monitor in disbelief.

Master Kiyotaki slammed that piece down hard enough to plow through the board and he’s grinding that Pawn into it right behind the Gold—making his formation harder than solid stone.

Stunned, Big Sis whispers, “Why now, in that situation .....?”

“He’s playing to mate,” I answer without missing a beat and slam a Pawn down on the analysis board just as hard as Master did.

“That’s the message he’s sending to Ayumu by playing a Low Pawn. *A tie ain’t good enough. I’m goin’ for yar King!* Or something like that.”

“Checkmate ..... against Kannabe-*sensei*?” The words *I don’t get it* are written all over Big Sis’s face as she adds, “He, an old man from Kansai in danger of getting demoted ..... beating one of Kanto’s best rising stars who has never once lost a Placement Match since becoming a pro?”

“Yes. Master is going for checkmate,” I declare.

Sota speaks up, making his argument while sifting through software ratings on his smartphone.

“He should meet the attack! Sure, he can ride it out, but the offense is still more than a distinct advantage. He’d win if only he would attack head on. So why would he just defend .....? Just what is Kannabe-*sensei* thinking?!”

“Sota. You still don’t know the first thing about Shogi, do you?”

“Huh?”

“Ayumu isn’t defending because he wants to. He’s defending because Master

is making him defend. With pressure.”

“Like a spiritual aura .....? I don’t believe in any of that voodoo stuff——.”

“You really don’t get it? That’s why I’m stronger than you.”

“≡≡≡!!”

Sota turns bright red and stops talking altogether. Getting put in his place must’ve hurt.

Until yesterday, I would’ve agreed with him.

But, after Zaou-*sensei* cracked me wide open ..... And now, watching Master’s Shogi, I feel like I’m getting a grasp of something important.

I only just noticed, but there are more people jammed into the Player’s Room right now than it can hold.

Sub League members who go to the Kiyotaki Classroom are right in the thick of it, but Practice League members and even former Sub League members dominating the amateur Shogi scene are here. Mr. Oishi and Asuka are in the crowd, too.

Everyone’s rooting for Master.

They were probably tracking the match on the blog but couldn’t sit still any longer and came to the association.

“Someone, please! Are there any players or Sub League members willing to lend a hand?! The classroom is so full of guests looking for commentary, the place could blow .....!”

Mr. Mine rushes up to the room, sending out an SOS.

“Sounds like people are here from all over Osaka.”

“Not quite.”

Mr. Mine puts on a serious face and answers.



“People from *all over Japan* are here. Could you turn away someone from a small island whose only mode of transportation to get here was a ship ... just because we’re *full*?”

“Alrighty. I’ll pitch in,” says Mr. Oishi as he leaves the room and heads toward the classroom downstairs. Talk about customer service. Asuka is so absorbed in the match on the monitor that she didn’t notice her father get up.

“..... Now I remember,” Big Sis quietly whispers. “Back when we first joined the Sub League, Master went around to every single Sub League member, not just the *Senseis* in charge, handing out candy and saying *Look after my apprentices*, didn’t he .....?”

“That he did .....”

I hated it at the time because it was so embarrassing, but ..... it was reassuring to have Master’s love and support at our backs since we were living away from our parents.

He’s kinder than anyone.

Grittier than anyone. Stronger than anyone. More intense than anyone. That’s Kousuke Kiyotaki, our Master.

An intense vibe has overtaken the Kansai Shogi Association.

Master seems to be feeding off that intensity as he drives Ayumu back further and further with each move.

“..... This is only a theory, but I believe Kannabe 6-*dan* can’t go on the attack because of how easily he took Kiyotaki-*sensei*’s Bishop in the first place,” says Mr. Kagamizu as he looks over the match record up to this point.

“Having a *Bishop advantage* for so long affected Kannabe 6-*dan*’s mindset ..... So long as he continues to think he has the advantage, it’s only natural to avoid a direct confrontation and go for a safer victory. This is a very important match, after all.”

165th move——9 One Dragon.

“The rating is 400. Offensive advantage. The software recommends ♠ 3 Four Pawn.”

167th move——5 Five Knight.

“Rating changed to 350. The software still says ♠ 3 Four Pawn would be the best move.”

Attack, and the software says Ayumu would win.

But he continues to resist by opening an escape route for his King rather than going for a decisive battle.

Then——.

“The rating is down to 1! No, they’re equal!!”

169th move. Now, at 1 o’clock in the morning, the playing field is even once again.

“How many nodes?!”

“200 million ..... I don’t believe it!”

Sota keeps saying, “No way” like a broken record after Mr. Kagamizu double checked the software’s accuracy. The Player’s Room, which looked like it had hosted an all-nighter not that long ago, has turned into a late-night hotspot. The air in here is intense enough to boil over.

Both players are doing one-minute Shogi.

“..... How’s this Shogi going to turn out .....?”

Sota busily glances back and forth between the monitor and the software ratings, his eyes wide open as he whispers under his breath.

Master’s minor pieces work together as a cohesive unit, desperately trying to contain Ayumu’s Dragon and Horse (Promoted Rook and Promoted Bishop, respectively) while pushing his entire *yagura* castle back into enemy territory at

the same time.

Pawns, Knights, Lances and Silvers ..... It's like they're all in sync, calling out to each other to herd the enemy pieces into one spot.

It's like all the geezers in the village have banded together to knock a meteorite back up into space. What a gritty spectacle. It feels like I'm watching one of those Hollywood movies where all the minor characters die off in the coolest way possible.

There's only one way movies like that end.

"It'll happen. A miracle is going to happen."

Ayumu reaches over the board to make the 185th move just as those words roll off my tongue.

Software ratings are jumping all over the place.

Once they settle—minus 600. Defender's advantage!

"WHHOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!"

Cheers shake the air.

Not just in the Player's Room. The whole association building is shaking up a storm.

Big Sis's voice quivers like she can't believe what she just saw when the software confirmed the miracle.

"Could he really ..... win? Can Master actually .....?"

What's happened so far is more than enough to be called a miracle.

Everyone who saw it with their own eyes started believing that the defender seriously does have a shot. The miracle is coming true .....!!

That's when it happened.

"Tokyo's results are in!" screams Ms. Mato after she checked through all the match records several times while simultaneously updating the match blog. "All Kanto's matches are complete! The player in third held out as long as he could but surrendered!"

Which means——.

"Kannabe-*sensei* promotes!! Kiyotaki-*sensei* has been demoted!!!!"

*Clatter .....*

The piece I had in my hand falls to the floor.

"It ..... can't ..... be ....."

All the energy in here gets sucked out all at once.

The miracle that's about to happen lost all meaning in the blink of an eye.

Master is on the monitor, rolling up his sleeves and smacking his head with his fan to psych himself up.

Ayumu, his cape on the floor behind him, keeps wiping sweat off his brow as he reads the board and rocks back and forth like a tree in a typhoon.

Except this fierce brawl doesn't have a point anymore.

"..... Placement Matches are like this."

I can hear the sadness in Mr. Kagamizu's voice.

For someone who's wrestled with rankings in the 3-*dan* division as much as Mr. Kagamizu has, that pain is an all too harsh reality. Pain that has to be accepted.

Big Sis, who has yet to experience that pain firsthand, says blankly, "Then ..... Why are they fighting at all ....."

No one could answer her. No one *in the room*, that is.

—The results were final, Kiyotaki 9-*dan* was demoted.

News spread through Internet blogs like wildfire.

Ai Hinatsuru's tablet slipped through her fingers the moment she saw it appear in the comments section.

Keika, who still stood with her back to the girl in the kitchen, spun around in surprise.

"Ai? What's wrong?"

"Uh? Uh-umm ..... Nothing, really——."

"..... Father's match is over, isn't it?"

"N-no, it's not. Grandpa-*sensei* is still fighting really hard! The match isn't over yet!"

"..... I see ..... He got demoted ..... Father dropped ....."

Keika connected the dots in an instant.

Ai could only tremble where she stood.

"K-Keika ..... I'm ..... s-sorry ..... I ..... I .....!"

Remembering what happened last night after telling Yaichi his results too soon, the young girl's eyes were awash with tears in mere moments.

"It's all right ..... This isn't your fault, Ai ..... It's no one's fault ....."

Keika slowly collapsed to the floor, her voice listless.

"..... I was prepared for this ..... There was nothing he could do once it was out of his hands ..... That's the way the Placement Matches are ....."

But it's too cruel, she bemoaned, silently cursing the people who built the system.

Her father was still whittling his life away, fighting with all his heart at this very moment.

And, even if he defeated Ayumu Kannabe by some miracle ..... That joy would be stunted by the news waiting for him at the end.

What could be more painful than that?

“..... Tell me, Ai. What ..... what am I supposed to say when he gets home?”

“.....”

Ai looked down at Keika cowering on the floor and answered with enough determination to drive back her own tears.

“Let’s go. Keika.”

“..... Ai .....?”

“You’ll surely regret it if you don’t. So, let’s go to the association.”

“B-But ..... W-what would we do even if we went? Father has already been demoted——.”

“Grandpa-*sensei* is fighting with all his heart!” Ai shouted. “You said it yourself, Keika. You said that it hurts soooooo much more for him to play Shogi than it does for Master and I, right? Then, why do you think he’s trying so hard?! Why do you think he puts up with so much pain?!”

“Why ..... he .....?”

“It’s obvious! Because he wants you to see!!”

“.....!!”

“Just like you’ve watched Grandpa-*sensei* closer than anyone else ..... No! Grandpa-*sensei* has watched you even closer!! He knows you’re trying harder than anybody else, so he knows that you want him to succeed more than anyone else ..... That’s why he’ll never give up! Grandpa-*sensei* won’t give up!!”

Keika’s eyes shook as if offering a glimpse into her shaking heart.

Those eyes met Ai's gaze head on as the young girl said once more, "Let's go! Keika!"

Ai tugged at her arm with surprising strength for one so small, determined to pull the woman all the way to the association if she had to and convinced her to start walking.

"Of all the people in the world, the one person Grandpa-*sensei* wants to watch this match is you, Keika!!"

Locked in a one-minute Shogi duel, Kousuke vigorously fanned himself with his paper fan spread as wide as it would go.

"Burnin' up ....."

His sweat-soaked kimono weighed him down like sheets of lead. Collar pulled open in the front, Kousuke directed as much air as possible toward his chest.

Dead of night in late February.

Temperatures outside hovered around zero Celsius.

However, the two players in the arena had sweat rolling down their faces.

Ayumu Kannabe had long since discarded his cape.

Perfectly set hair had become a mess.

Gallant faces twisted in pain.

Words were absentmindedly mumbled between shallow breaths.

"Burnin' up ....."

While the formations had shifted into Kousuke's favor, Ayumu was now attempting to *nyugyoku*. His hesitation was a thing of the past.

The match recorder's cheeks had taken on a red hue, tears building in his eyes.

*“I want to play exactly like this.”*

For this was the first day in his life that not being among the professional ranks made his heart ache. It was also the first time another player’s match had brought him to tears.

Kousuke Kiyotaki and Ayumu Kannabe’s Shogi was just that magnificent.

A simple game was taking hold of the hearts of all who witnessed it, even altering the paths their lives would take.

“So hot .....

Their fate had already been decided.

The only ones who were still unaware were the players themselves.

However, that fact only served to make this Shogi even more precious. After all, the combatants believed that the only way to control their destiny was to win this match.

Kousuke advanced.

Ayumu evaded.

Their exhausted brains were running on mere fumes and unable to function as they normally would.

Despite that, their instincts as players allowed them to continue fighting.

Kousuke’s Shogi, strong as tempered iron.

Ayumu’s Shogi, keen as a silver saber.

The two clashed as formations shifted and opened little by little ..... And today, the one who possessed more desire, more courage was——







"Kaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Kousuke sliced down the Horse and Bishop and set up to make his final assault.

“Ghh .....!!”

Ayumu's King, which had advanced to the fifth row on the 135th move and remained stationary ever since, retreated to the sixth row on the 215th move.

A total of 80 moves.

More than four hours had passed in real time.

Kousuke had committed the same amount of moves and time it would take to complete a separate match with limited waiting time to forcing Ayumu's King back and succeeded.

Only one row.

Just one row.

Almost as if wanting to hear himself say it, Kousuke repeated the Shogi proverb that he had followed since he first started playing the game.

“Cut off the King’s escape!”

It was the most basic of the basics.

That was the moment the Offensive King became cornered.

## PLACEMENT MATCHES

Now, the check rush is on.

“But, he’s already checkmated .....

“He can’t just give up. Of course not.”

Sota and Mr. Kagamizu are talking back and forth.

I can almost hear Ayumu’s pieces scream every time he snaps one down.

*“I don’t want to lose.”*

*“I’m scared.”*

*“This can’t be.”*

*“I want to promote.”*

*“Please, no.”*

I can tell he wants to yell with each move.

Because, throw in the towel now, and everything he’s worked for over the past year could have been for nothing.

People who already know he’s promoting might think this desperate struggle is kind of funny.

But, here and now, no one’s laughing at the battle these two are fighting.

“..... I always knew Kiyotaki-*sensei* was special. All right! Let’s watch the conclusion with proper posture!!”

With that, Mr. Kagamizu sits down on his ankles right on the Player’s Room floor. Other Sub League members who frequented the Kiyotaki Classroom were right behind him. While it was strange to see so many knees on the linoleum floor, no one even thought about making a joke.

“Master .....!” says Big Sis with her hands together as if throwing up a prayer.

She’s clamping her ash-colored eyes closed tight. Even knowing that Master has as good as won doesn’t make it any less scary to watch. She just can’t do it. No one knows what will happen during one-minute Shogi. Seriously, these two have been playing for over seventeen hours straight .....

But Master held strong. He didn’t make a mistake.

Move 246—Ayumu stopped trying to find a move once he saw Master’s Dragon at 8 Six.

Because, well, he couldn’t make one.

“One step checkmate .....?”

“Yes.”

Big Sis asks and I confirm with a nod.

“Master won.”

Just like he said he would do back on move 156, Master checkmated Ayumu’s King.

Neither player said a word when the surrender happened.

All the ceiling-mounted camera was showing us on the monitor was Ayumu’s clenched fist shaking on top of his piece stand and the back of his head as he hunched over the board.

“Kannabe’s lost! The first black mark on his Placement Match record!!”

“‘Kiyotaki victorious’! Yes, you heard that right! Kiyotaki actually won!!”

The Player’s Room erupts like a noise bomb went off. Reporters and journalists are prepping their cameras all at once.

I—join Big Sis in racing out the door.

“Master .....!!”

It’s not like going to the arena will make any difference. No one can change the results. But, we couldn’t just stand there.

It’s not logical.

Gasping for breath, we sprint down the halls like puppies desperately looking for their parents. We pass by the match recorder taking the match record to the office on the way. I could’ve sworn his eyes were bright red.

Big Sis and I get to the arena and step inside.

The air is still electric and, while not impossible, I can’t bring myself to go up to the board. Quietly and cautiously, I find an out-of-the-way spot and sit down on my ankles.

“..... Master .....”

I look up at my battle-worn Master from far behind the lower seat. He’s sitting on his ankles with his chest triumphantly exposed while he fixes the collar on his kimono. Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan*.

“He’s pretty cool,” Big Sis quietly mumbles so only I could hear.

She used the same voice back when we were kids, when we idolized Master in a kimono so much the two of us would draw pictures of him.

“Really cool. We have the coolest Master in the world.”

“..... For sure .....”

I came here thinking I could hold them back but ..... tears start rolling down my cheeks.

There is no stopping them once they get going. Hot tears keep coming. Big Sis is next to me, crying just as hard.

Big Sis, who almost never changes her facial expression, is moaning between

sobs.

“Ginko ..... Yaichi, too, eh?”

Master looks at us sitting and crying behind the lower seat and quietly says, “Ayumu’s gone up and I’m down, is it?”

“..... Yes .....,” I answer, voice shaking.

Only players involved have the right to ask about promotion and demotion results. No one is allowed to up and tell them on their own. That’s especially true for demotion.

That rule isn’t on the books anywhere.

But it’s an important code of conduct in the Shogi world that should be followed.

Big Sis and I just broke that rule ..... With our tears blotching the *tatami* mats.

Except, Master looks at Ayumu with an invigorated grin and congratulates him.

“That’s great news! Don’t slack off next season, ya hear?”

“..... Tha ..... you .....,” says Ayumu, his voice barely there at all and gone just as fast.

You’d think that someone who had just pulled off the amazing feat of promoting in three consecutive seasons would be happy, but I don’t see any happiness on his face at all.

His eyes are sweeping back and forth across the board without focusing anywhere in particular, every detail of his loss getting burned into his memory.

Actually, it’s surprising how refreshed Master looks even though he just got demoted.

—How can he look like he just finished working out at the gym at a time like this .....?

At long last, media people start filing into the room one after another.

Once they'd finished photographing the two players having a silent review session, flashes going off every second, one of the magazine reporters approaches Ayumu *as apologetically as possible*.

"Kannabe-sensei ..... Um, may I ask for an interview about your promotion in a different room .....?"

"....."

Swaying ..... Ayumu leaves the arena about as surefooted as a ghost. He has to do the impossible, give *Joyous Comments* right after a loss ..... I know that pain all too well.

Then a little girl comes into the arena just as he leaves with the journalists.

"Ai? Why are you——?"

Rather than answer me directly, Ai is out of breath as she pulls a lady into the arena behind her.

It's Keika.

"....."

She cautiously steps inside with Ai yanking on her arm ..... and sits down in front of Master.

"Father ....."

"Oh, Keika."

A twinge of pain crosses over Master's face for the first time.

"Sorry I couldn't do more when ya came all this way to cheer me on."

"It's ..... It's not ....."

She couldn't say another word.

It was all she could do to keep her sobbing under control with a handkerchief



over her mouth. Seeing her like that breaks the dam and Master's eyes start tearing up.

I just noticed that it's only the Kiyotaki Shogi Family still in the arena ..... I bet people are giving us space. All those people who were rooting for Kousuke Kiyotaki.

With his apprentices and grand apprentices assembled, Master addresses all of us in a gentle tone.

"..... All I've got on my resume is challengin' the Meijin. That's 'cause I got my clock cleaned in other leagues. So, I made up my mind to retire when I get demoted to C ....."

".....!!"

Everyone holds their breath, trying to come up with the right words to change his mind.

But Master raises his hand to cut us off.

"Durin' my days stuck goin' nowhere and fallin' down the ranks, I did a lot of thinkin' about my reason for bein' around ..... I'm way too over the hill to make another run at the Meijin, so what's the point of playin' Shogi at all? Objectively speakin', gettin' back into A from C ain't realistic ..... Which means bowin' out as a Meijin Challenger ought to be the right path."

You play Shogi to win.

And, pros have a duty to win matches. As someone who's made a name for themselves by winning, they should quit being a pro when they feel like they can't.

Master's logic does make sense.

"But———I got another reason to keep goin'."

Then, Master spells everything out.

The reason why he was so calm and collected right after playing in the match he decided would be his last to put himself out of his own misery.

“Ya’ll.”

All ..... of us?

“‘Cause ya’ll say watchin’ me is what made ya who ya are now. Yar there to keep me goin’ down the right path. I realized just how valuable that is ..... sure took me long enough, eh?”

I look back up at my Master as he smiles down at his apprentices.

The right pant leg of his *hakuma* trousers is wrinkled to all hell right above the knee.

He’s whacked himself so hard with his fan to stay focused that it’s in rough shape.

The board and pieces in front of him show the wear and tear that comes from a duel to the death, only the piece stands are in pristine condition.

All of them trace Master’s path .....

The footprints that Big Sis and I have run ourselves ragged trying to follow.

The very same path that Ai and Keika are trying to take right now. I’m sure that Ai Yashajin feels the same way even though she isn’t here to say it.

The desire to get stronger, even if it means being stubborn and getting muddy in the process.

“The path’s still goin’. Only difference is that now I’ll be the one chasin’ ya.”

Gazing lovingly at the apprentices who naturally came to him in the arena, Master says loud and clear, “Which means, I still got a lotta path to follow. I ain’t retirin’.”

“Master!”

“Father .....!” Big Sis and I say with glee, but Keika seems to be at a loss for

words.

Ai jumps to her feet, yelling, “Grandpa-*sensei*!” and runs over to give him a hug.

Giving her a gentle pat on the head, Master says, “Zaou-*sensei* said it himself ..... that nothin’s more borin’ than playin’ Shogi without carin’ who wins.”

Sounding sure of himself, Master declares.

“Right now, Shogi’s more fun than it’s been all my life. Throwin’ that away ..... I just can’t do it.”

Then he looks to me with Ai in his arms and says.

“We might be bumpin’ into each other next season in C-1, Yaichi.”

“..... The rules prevent apprentices from playing their Masters in Placement Matches below the B-2 Division, Master .....,” I say, laughing through snot and tears.

“That right?”

Master grins.

“Then I’d better get back into B-1 ASAP. Heck, might as well get back into A while I’m at it! With Ginko on the up-and-up, let’s all challenge the Meijin in the playoff as a family! Be one heck of a party, don’t ya think?”

“..... I’ll pull off gratitude for real this time.”

I laugh, wiping away more snot and tears.

Then, he places that big strong hand of his on my head and ruffles my hair just like he did back on the day we met and laughs from the heart.

“Yeah right. I’ll be the one payin’ ya back!”

## EPILOGUE

There's a piece of paper in front of me.

"..... Joyous Promotion Comments, great."

It's a column where Shogi magazines ask newly promoted players to submit their own articles.

It can be about anything. Most players reflect on the path to promotion and thank the people who helped them along the way.

I'd normally type this up on a computer, but I've always wanted to handwrite this when I got the chance.

Most players are probably the same way. It's a special article for us, after all.

"But ..... what exactly am I supposed to say .....?"

I've been dreaming about writing this *Joyous Comments* article for so long.

But, now that it's here, I have no idea what to write.

After Master's *Letdown Party* finished up, I carried my sleeping apprentice all the way home on my back just as the sun was starting to come up this morning. Now, I've spent hours in the *tatami* room staring at this blank sheet of paper as sunbeams filter through the window.

My apprentice is out like a light next to me, my sweatshirt still clutched in her grasp.

"Zzzz ..... Zzzz ..... Master ..... You're ..... the best ....."

Her sleep talk makes me grimace. She's not wrong about one thing, the Dragon King Ryuo is de facto number one.

But, I'm certainly not the best player in the Shogi world. If I were undeniably the strongest, I wouldn't have lost to Zaou-sensei on the day he was set to

retire.

## Placement Matches

There's another sheet in front of me with that title and over 100 names on it.

Next season, my name will be listed at 83.

That's the very bottom of C-1.

I barely advanced from C-2's basement to be the lowest of three players promoted to C-1. What's worse, it happened by default rather than my own skill.

"..... The supposedly *best* player, the Ryuo? Pathetic ....."

All the trust and confidence I had built up are gone.

I don't even know what kind of Shogi I should play anymore.

But——.

"The kind of player I want to be is still burned into my memory."

I pick up my pen and start writing down words as if trying to beat them out of the paper itself.

The first things that came out were my regrets, as well as reprimanding myself for letting success get to my head. Then, I reflect on myself as a whole while the wounds are still fresh. There isn't a *joyous* word in here. Instead, it's all me talking big like a kid and boasting about dreams I've had ever since I was one.

That, and putting my gratitude and admiration for my Master into words.

This article also ran in the same Shogi magazine that month.

## The First Father and Daughter Ever on the Professional Shogi Stage

# An Interview with Kousuke Kiyotaki & Keika Kiyotaki

Written and Edited by Mato

While there have been examples of fathers and sons becoming Shogi professionals in the past, there has never been a father-daughter duo until now.

The ones who accomplished that historical feat are Kousuke Kiyotaki 9-*dan* and his daughter Keika Kiyotaki Women's League 3-*kyu*. I recently had an opportunity to speak with them at their abode.

Once the home of live-in apprentices Yaichi Kuzuryu-*ryuo* and Ginko Sora-*dual title* (Sub League 3-*dan*), the Kiyotaki household is now home to a practice group calling itself the *Kiyotaki Classroom*. Nary a moment goes by without the wooden *snap* of a Shogi piece going off these walls.

Father and daughter took time out of their busy lives to give me a peek inside.

"What month's this for again?"

Upon telling him May, the elder Kiyotaki grumbled.

"Well, that leaves a bad taste. All those Joyous Promotion Comments and I'm the only one gettin' demoted ..... Like offerin' up my own head."

His daughter Keika burst into laughter beside him. This was in fact a joke meant to put me at ease.

The ice immediately broken, I start off by asking Kiyotaki about his state of mind.

"I was thinkin' the C division was my grave when I first dropped. But, the real grave was thinkin' that way in the first place. There ain't nothin' wrong with

fightin' there. I can still play Placement Matches as a pro. Which means I still qualify to take a run at bein' Meijin. All that's left is me puttin' in the effort to get there."

Though demoted by the slimmest of margins, Kiyotaki emerged victorious from his final Placement Match last season against Ayumu Kannabe 7-dan whose promotion had already been determined.

In addition to running the day-to-day operations at the Noda Shogi Center, Kiyotaki has been busy overseeing the massive practice group called the *Kiyotaki Classroom* as well as his apprentices' progression.

Not to mention that Kiyotaki has always been known to travel great distances to promote the sport of Shogi whenever asked.

Could this overwhelming schedule be behind the demotion?

Kiyotaki rejected that notion straightaway.

"I promoted to A the same season I took two live-in apprentices. My B-2 and B-1 promotions weren't a cakewalk either, comin' durin' the aftermath of the Great Kansai Earthquake and after losin' my wife ..... Seems I promote when I know *I gotta do this!* Actually, I get knocked down when I start thinkin' *I'm in good shape* (haha). I don't think bein' busy is a problem."

What season did you feel you committed yourself the most?

Once again, Kiyotaki's answer was instantaneous.

"C-2 into C-1, without a doubt ..... I was focusin' on another level back durin' that first time. I swore to myself I'd make it happen."

Keika gives her father an inquisitive glance.

"The first time you promoted? Was there a reason?"

"Ya don't know?"

"?"

“Ya’d just been born.”

“!! ..... Father! You’ll make me cry .....”

Keika dabbed her eyes with the palm of her hand. Her father’s unexpected comment left her no time to reach for a handkerchief.

While on the topic, I asked Kiyotaki the meaning behind the name *Keika*.

Was it you who came up with it, *Sensei*?

He answers, “Course I did. Came to me in a flash when I was lookin’ over a board. It was so good, I rushed straight to the ward office to register her without tellin’ my wife (haha).”

He boasted with confidence.

However, his daughter had a surprising take on her name.

“Honestly, I’m not very fond of it.”

“Huh?! Y-Yar not .....?”

“Well, the *keima* Knight and *kyousha* Lance are both amazing pieces that can jump over others and charge forward as far as they want. I can’t compete with that ..... It’s a lot of pressure.”

“.....” (Looking despondent.)

“Ah! I-I don’t hate my name!! The Knight that can jump over pieces and the Lance that can burst forward ..... I’m happy to be named after both of them. It’s just——.”

Keika turned to address me.

“My favorite pieces are Pawns. There may be many of them and they may be the weakest piece on the board. But they never retreat, advancing forward step-by-step without faltering until they promote into a piece as good as a Gold. Seeing them achieve that goal ..... It reminds me of my father.”

“K ..... Keika .....!”



This time it was her father's turn to wipe tears away.

Are you happy you decided to continue playing Shogi?

Upon posing that question, Keika responded with a resounding, "Of course! It's always what I've dreamed of doing and, while there were times I thought about giving up on it ..... I'm so happy I became a Women's League player. Seeing my efforts pay off is great, but the best thing is knowing that my Father will always be my Master in the Shogi world. You see, I was jealous of what Yaichi and Ginko had. Their bond with my Father through Shogi."

Taking her Father's hand, the younger Kiyotaki opened up.

"But, jealousy doesn't help anyone. Being connected by blood doesn't require any effort. On the other hand, being a Shogi family is hard work. That's true for everything."

Effort and hard work. Keika used those words many times.

"If it hadn't been for Shogi, I'm sure I would have lived a sheltered life. I'm very thankful to Shogi for giving me the opportunity to grow as a person ..... And for making Yaichi and Ginko true members of this family after living together for so long. Ai Hinatsuru and Ai Yashajin are a bonus!"

On further inspection, this family isn't just a father and a daughter, but has grandchildren as well. The bonds they share are most definitely thicker than blood.

Shogi is a board game.

That being so, the day that software reveals all its intricacies may be on the horizon. It could very well mark the end of Shogi as a *game*.

However, Shogi is not just a game.

For without it, Ginko Sora and Yaichi Kuzuryu would have never come to this household. Without Shogi, this father and daughter would be nowhere near as close. Ai Hinatsuru would still be living on the north coast and Ai Yashajin would

most likely still be haunted by her tragic past if Shogi did not exist.

Shogi is a driving force behind life stories.

Wins and losses send many people down different paths.

Everything arises from one simple move on a board—and no software rating could ever predict all its outcomes.

I truly feel that this family is living proof.

“I wanna show that I can still hold my own even while my apprentices are in the spotlight. Only way to do that is to get results. Demoted? Just get promoted back up. I’ll promote outta C-1 next season, and outta B-2 the next. Then, from B-1 ..... What’s the record for the oldest player to promote to A again?”

60 years old.

Kiyotaki’s face turned solemn, nodding at my answer.

“Alright. Then, I’d say it’s about time that record got broken.”

Kiyotaki went on to tell me about his hopes and dreams for the future.

They weren’t all about himself. He talked about his daughter, his apprentices, the Sub League and Practice League members continuously sharpening their skills at the Kiyotaki Classroom, as well as continuing to enjoy the game he loves.

His daughter sat beside him, listening with a smile on her face. One thing is for certain, this household will continue to bear many more Shogi children.

Lastly, Kiyotaki donned the look of a boxer stepping into the ring as he made one last assertion.

His biggest dream of all, one that he’s held dear since his childhood days and has allowed him to keep fighting as a professional Shogi player.

“I want to be the Meijin.”



# FOR THE AFTERWORD—*ABOUT MY MOTHER*

There are so many different people in the Shogi world. All of their stories collide and intertwine over the course of the year in Placement Matches and result in many dramatic episodes. The vast majority of them are tragedies and Shogi fans tend to gravitate toward demotions and retirement more than promotions.

One person who stands out from the crowd is Kouichi Fukaura 9-*dan*.

He is the face of *willpower* in the Shogi world. Including moving to Tokyo from his home in Sasebo City on his own at the age of twelve right after completing elementary school to begin training, no one has endured more hardship playing professional Shogi than Fukaura-*sensei*.

He's missed promotion or been demoted by the slimmest of margins based solely on his ranking in Placement Matches so many times that his Wikipedia article reads: *no luck in Placement Matches*. Even so, he would always come back after hitting the ceiling and eventually claim promotion. One look at his history is enough to see his immense willpower.

It goes without saying that Fukaura-*sensei* has had plenty of chances to write *Joyous Promotion Comments* during his career, but ..... There's a specific article written by Fukaura **7-*dan*** that struck a particular chord with me.

I returned home to Sasebo in the days following Placement Matches. I had many matches in those days, playing two a week and going home on the weekends only to return to a match. One continuous cycle. My mother was hospitalized, confined to her bed without the use of her arms and legs at only 58. Questions constantly filled my head. Just what is cancer and why does it

turn out like this?

When suddenly one day, “I’ll beat it, I’ll beat it! This disease will never beat me!” echoed through the hospital’s hallways. It was my quiet and unassuming mother. My father gave his wife a farewell kiss as my wife held back tears while adjusting my mother’s bedding.

My mother passed away on July 31st.

My father didn’t come home for three days once her funeral was complete. He spent that time preparing to reopen his restaurant, the same one he had owned and operated with my mother for the past 20 years, only this would be the first time without her. He was a true professional. There were hard decisions to make, and he did so on the spot.

—All those left behind can do is continue working hard.—

My mother was dauntless. Her blood flows in my veins. I want to keep fighting with her: this is my greatest source of pride.

*(Shogi World Magazine, May 2002: Joyous Promotion Comments: Mother’s Passing)*

My own mother passed away while I was writing *The Ryuo’s Work Is Never Done!* Volume 5.

She was 58.

Barely a year after my grandfather died, my mother and only remaining family member did as well. Why? Why did it turn out like this? Why did my mother go to bed as her usual self that last night but never wake up?

Acute heart failure.

Her heart simply stopped beating in the middle of the night and she went painlessly ..... But of course, that explanation provided no solace.

This all happened when the series was receiving great reviews, winning awards from the Shogi Pen Club and the *Kono Raito Noberu Ga Sugoi! (This Light Novel Is Amazing!)* distinction.

Just as I was coming to terms with life without my grandfather, just as the future was starting to look bright, it all vanished without warning in the middle of the night.

The woman who raised me on her own despite her lifelong breathing issues.

I was unable to repay my mother for all she did for me.

Her only son, a lifelong bachelor who devoted his time to a genre of literature constantly berated by the general public. Yet, all my loving mother ever said was simply, "All you need to do is keep on living."

She accepted me for who I am.

This came to mind as I oversaw preparations for her funeral, now completely alone in the world.

*Is there any point to writing light novels? Will anything good come out of me continuing to write now that I'm alone?*

I thought I was proud of my decision to become a light novel author.

I thought I was fully prepared to write a story I believed in no matter what the rest of the world had to say.

But the reality of my mother's death shook me to the core.

Was she happy with the books I wrote?

Wouldn't she have been happier if I got a desk job with some company, got married and had given her grandchildren instead?

All of this was going through my head when I happened across *Joyous Promotion Comments* entitled *Mother's Passing* written by Fukaura-sensei.

Both our mothers being 58 when they left this world caught my attention, so I decided to research what Fukaura-sensei's life was like at the time.

That's when I realized how naïve I had been.

Fukaura-sensei promoted into B-1 going through the same grief I was experiencing at that very moment. Further still, he won a match immediately following his mother's death.

Unlike me, he continued fighting while watching his mother deteriorate before his eyes. He suffered so much more but refused to run away from the unfair reality, instead choosing to face it head on and he emerged victorious.

It felt like the league standings from that year were trying to tell me something.

*If you feel like what you're writing is pointless, then start writing something with a point. No one can tell you what makes living worthwhile, you have to find it yourself!*

Only then, when I'd lost the mother who gave me everything, did I realize how spoiled I was.

Late at night.

Well past midnight when I was alone with her after the wake and all our visitors had left.

I opened my laptop next to the casket in which my mother slept and picked up where I'd left off on *The Ryuo's Work Is Never Done!* Volume 5.

Working until the sun came up, I managed to finish Record 1 and then went to a convenience store to print out the manuscript. I then placed it in her casket to be cremated along with her.

"Now that I think about it, I never let you see me work ....."



My mother, reduced to white bones, and my manuscript, burned to ash. That realization hit me as I clutched the still-warm urn containing both in my arms. I cried so hard that day I don't remember when the tears stopped.

Writing is a process that cannot be finished in a matter of moments.

My pain and suffering continued until I put the finishing touches on Volume 5.

Even though the funeral was over, there were still legal matters of the will to sort out and deciding what to do with everything my mother left behind. All of this was necessary, but it felt like I was tearing open new wounds as memories of her came back every single time.

All the loneliness, regret and sadness. The only reason I was able to keep writing all the way to the end was because of the passion and commitment left behind by Shogi players in Placement Match records, seeing their battles against cruel twists of fate and repeatedly overcoming them. They prove that human beings can rise above pain and suffering, no matter how overwhelming they may be.

Just like Kouichi Fukaura.

"Writing light novels is nothing compared to what they go through."

"I can do more. My writing can be better."

"Don't cut corners. Write something so good that when you're done, your first thought is *I can die happy!*"

Whenever I hit a wall, whenever I got so frustrated at my own lack of writing skills that I wanted to throw everything out the window, I would take out Kouichi Fukaura *Joyous Promotion Comments* and read it again. Then, recite his words in my mind.

—All those left behind can do is continue working hard.—

My mother was a kind, loving person. If I have inherited even half of her kindness, bringing it out in my light novels could be what gives my writing

purpose.

The Shogi world has given me the strength to overcome pain.

If I have one hope for this story, it's that it gives strength to those who read it.

That it can provide the willpower to take even the slightest step forward amidst all the pain and suffering.

That it can bestow a ray of light that says *I want to live to see tomorrow* on someone trapped in a cycle of loneliness and despair.

Because if it does, I'm sure it would make my mother happy.





**REVIEW  
SESSION**

# REVIEW SESSION

“Let’s grill outdoors and barbecue!”

That suggestion came out of nowhere.

Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka bursts into the Kansai Shogi Association Player’s Room just as Yamashiro Ouka Machi Kugui and I finish a practice match and runs right up to us.

“Come again? A barbecue? Huh? ..... Why?”

“Splendid.”

I’m still trying to come to grips with the way-too-sudden invitation but Machi jumps on board right away. “I shall provide transportation,” she adds and I was in the backseat of her favorite orange car before I knew it.

Ryou in the passenger seat, we hit the road.

She wouldn’t let anyone sit in the passenger seat before because she said it’s too much of a distraction. Maybe she’s gotten used to driving? Or did she just make up that excuse to keep me from sitting there last time .....?

“Load up on meat! Beef! Pork!! Chicken!!!”

“Vegetables are also a must~.”

We stop at a supermarket to get what we need along the way. While the two ladies are busy getting the ingredients they want, I find a portable gas burner, paper plates and whatnot.

We meet up at the register.

“Kuzu. Foot the bill.”

“Say what? Me? Why?”

“Cuz you’re the one that got promoted, yea? Fork over that wallet.”

“How kind you are, Ryuo-san≡”

While I’m not happy about this arrangement, it’s customary in the Shogi world for the one being celebrated to cover the costs. My hands are tied. Who would’ve thought prepping for a cookout would be this expensive? Well, buying all this will be worth it if I take Charlette out for a barbecue ..... I convince myself and just go with it.

“Alright? Where are we doing this?”

“Next to any old river’d be fine, wouldn’t it?”

“Huh?”

So then, the mastermind didn’t have a plan all along.

“That spot over there should suffice,” says Machi as she turns the wheel toward a riverbank that just happened to come into view.

There isn’t much here at all, just a meandering river surrounded by flat ground. That’s where we start setting up our cookout. Well, it’s not like anything around here will catch fire and water is right there just in case, so I suppose it’s the perfect spot.

“..... Are open flames permitted at this location?”

“Aghh? Sure are. It’s blazing.”

That’s not what Machi meant .....

“For such low-cost meat, eating outside sure makes it flavorful.”

“What’d I tell you?! Shogi players are always cooped up inside. Having some fun outdoors every once in a while’s good for you!”

One thing’s for sure, the food is delicious.

Spring is just starting. The cherry blossom trees growing along the riverbank barely have buds on their branches, but the hint of a warm breeze and the sound of flowing water make it really nice out here.

I'm standing next to the burner, manning the grill, while Ryou and Machi have the car trunk open and are using the luggage space like a bench. There's something about the situation that just screams *adolescence*! I had my reservations at first, but this is pretty fun. Maybe it's all this nervous energy coming from not knowing if we're *allowed* to be out here, but all this eating and talking is a blast.

Then, after about an hour of living it up ...

Ryou takes a swig of cola right from the bottle and says under her breath, "..... Say. You guys remember the day we first met?"

Of course I do. Clearly.

"The Elementary School Meijin Tournament. I was in third grade and both of you were fifth-graders. Ayumu was there, too."

"I was beside myself, bawling after losing to O-Ryou——."

"And I beat Ayumu in the semifinals to play against Ryou in the final."

"An' I buried my fist in your gut after the Award Ceremony cuz seeing you in first place pissed me off so much."

"That really hurt ..... To think, all of that was ten years ago."

People who have the makings of a pro Shogi player typically know how to play around the time they figure out the difference between left and right.

Then they meet in classrooms and tournaments.

Shogi attracts them like magnets from every corner of the country. Just like the way all of us met for the first time at the Elementary School Meijin Tournament.

That's why we're childhood friends, but also rivals at the same time.

"It's incredible when you think about it. We met in the worst way possible, and yet here we are grilling outdoors and enjoying ourselves."

People stumble across other people who share their personality traits and values completely by chance during all those competitions dating back to when they were just kids.

They become *fellow warriors*, their bonds deepening every time they clash.

Including Ayumu, the four of us are exactly that.

“Well, knowing we’re going to be like this whether I like it or not for at least another ten years is kind of depressing. Fated to be your personal punching bag .....

“..... Sounds good to me.”

“..... Seconded.”

*Wait, what?* I thought to myself ... because these two are never this serious.

Just when I was about to ask them about it.

*Weeeoooo, weeeooo~~~!!*

“Crap! It’s the feds!!”

“Huuh?! That’s a police siren?!”

Ryou jumps to her feet, reacting like she’s heard that sound plenty of times before and Machi revs the engine to life. I throw all our supplies and garbage into the back seat and the tires squeal the instant I close the door behind me.

Luckily, we lost the police car thanks to our perfect teamwork.

“Wheeew! That was far too close.”

“Oh, that was good. All thanks to me hearing it early.”

“Good?! There was nothing good about it!!”

Finally feeling safe with the door closed after being a split second away from being flung out of the car, I yell at the girls giggling in the front seat. Great, now they’re high-fiving each other.



“Don’t both of you realize that we’re title holders?! All of us getting arrested at once would be the biggest scandal in Shogi world history!!”

“That’s of no concern. Because we’re minors, after all.”

“Yep. The papers can’t publish our names.”

“That’s not the point!” I yell at the top of my lungs, leaning in between the two front seats as Ryou responds.

“Well, I’d have to forfeit my match in three days if we all ended up in the slammer. That’d royally suck.”

“Perhaps we should atone for our actions by tidying up the riverside next time?”

“Yeah, I’m down for that. Sounds good.”

Despite nodding along with her, I’ve been so focused on my own matches recently that I’m not exactly sure what match Ryou has coming up.

“..... By the way, what match are you playing in three days?”

“The Yamashiro Ouka Challenger match. Against Ika Sainokami.”

“The what?!”

That’s huge!

Machi Kugui—the Yamashiro Ouka title holder giggles to herself as she says, “I wonder if my chances of a successful defense would increase should the passenger side happened to collide with one of those concrete power poles on the side of the road.”

“No denying I’m stronger than Ika.”

“Indeed. Ika may be more talented, but you’re twice as stubborn, O-Ryou.”

“As if.”

They’re giving each other a hard time right now, but—.

I'd be willing to bet that if Ryou does win and becomes the Yamashiro Ouka Challenger, these two won't be in the same car like this again.

Ryou won't be dropping by the Kansai Association to practice and the three of us won't be going off on stupid adventures.

It's not like their friendship will disappear because of the impending battle.

But, all of us have devoted our lives to Shogi. And titles are life for Shogi players. So long as we're fighting for our lives, no one can emerge unscathed.

Shogi isn't a physical sport, so no one will have visible scars.

It's the heart that takes damage.

That's why the wounds cut so deep. You can put bandages on physical injuries, but hearts take much longer to heal.

—Today's jaunt wasn't to celebrate me at all. It was a farewell party .....

Ryou and Machi just can't say it.

They act like everything's normal but are pushing the envelope much further than usual.

It's just that these two have never fought for their *lives* against each other before, so doing something stupid was an experiment.

Testing to see that no matter how bad the battle gets, their ..... our relationship will always go back to normal.

They want to believe that, even if they're wounded after the battle, those wounds will heal up one day.

Sensing the vibe, I join in from the back seat.

"Both of you might as well go down in a fiery wreck together! That way, my apprentices won't have as much competition for titles."

"Machi, put her in reverse. Smash Kuzu along with the trash."

“As you wish!”

“Uwwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!! Hey, hey, why am I the only one actually going to get creamed here! Whhhhhoaaaaaaa! Seriously! You’re going to hit that pole! Stop, stop, STOP! STOOOOOP————!!”

Three days later.

Two Women’s Title Holders clashed in an all-out brawl in Kanto.

Both were so dead set on winning that two Repetition Draws were triggered, extending their match late into the night, which is extremely rare for women’s matches because of the short waiting time. The eventual challenger emerged victorious because of unbreakable grit and the persistence to come back from the brink of defeat.

That challenger’s name—is Women’s King Ryou Tsukiyomizaka.

When asked about her feelings on the upcoming match in the post-challenger match interview, she stated, “As long as I’m doing this, I’m taking the title. I’ll rip it out of her dead hands if I have to.”

Spring. Around the time pink cherry blossom petals grace the streets of Kyoto.

The Yamashiro Ouka Title Match is set to begin.

AUTHOR

SHIROW SHIRATORI

For the most part, little girls have been the stars of this story but now the geezers get a chance to shine. Even old guys love the spotlight! I must admit reading *Kindan no ossan-ryu nakabisha yaburi* (*The Forbidden Geezer-Style Central Rook Breaker*) left quite an impression on me. Written by Hiroshi Kamiya 8-dan, it was so much fun to read because he interrupts his own analysis by saying things like, “To be frank, geezers don’t understand the meaning of the word *quality*,” all the time.

ILLUSTRATOR

SHIRABII

I’ve been involved with *Ryuo* since Volume 1, and I’ve never cried as hard as I did reading Volume 7. It inspired me to draw many characters at once.

# The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!

VOLUME 7

Story by Shirow Shiratori Art by Shirabii

Supervision by Saiyuki

RYUO NO OSHIGOTO! 7

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